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THE AGE FOR LOVE

A Howard Hughes Production. *The Age for Love.*

UNHAPPY WITH HER DOMESTIC LIFE, JEAN TELLS DUDLEY SHE HAS GONE BACK TO HER OLD POSITION.

THE AGE FOR LOVE

Ernest Pascal

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THE AGE FOR LOVE

It was his eyes, she decided at length, that attracted her so fiercely and made her constantly glance across the smoke-laden room. They were blue eyes, smoke-gray blue, evenly set in a handsome, straight-featured face, and uniquely tilted at the corners so that they always seemed to be smiling. Youthful eyes, younger than the rest of him, boy's eyes . . . and, studying him, she scarcely heard what Jude Taylor was saying.

"Don't you know it is very rude to stare?" he chided her. "To say nothing of not listening to me!"

"I was listening."

"You weren't. I was watching you. Your attention

was entirely absorbed by that oafish young man over there. I know what you were thinking."

He was a writer of pathological novels about neurotic women, and he prided himself on the fact that the feminine mind was an open book to him, especially if it lay back of a pretty face.

"You don't believe me!"

"No." She shook her head.

Getting up, he crossed to the fireplace where the young man in question was standing talking down to Clemence Boone, a little lady of high literary attainments, and an anemic-faced girl with great sad eyes. They opened their circle welcomingly as Taylor approached, but his words were for the young man. He drew him away and whispered something that caused him to look and frown over at Jean.

Behind her, on a sofa, Ivan Propatkin was boring Nina Warr with his talk about the Revolution. He was an oldish man with square broad shoulders and a huge blond head. Nina suffered him patiently because her husband was anxious to get the book he was writing.

"What I say is true—all," he was saying. "Many times I have been in the market-place at Kiev to see the carts come in. Blood drips from the bottom. The stench makes one sick. One beautiful morning in the dawn the canvas blew away and I saw only arms and legs."

"Dear me," Nina exclaimed lightly, "how terrible!"

"You speak here of the Revolution," he went on. "The Revolution this—the Revolution that! A clean

word. But you were not there to see. For years it went on. Always there was killing. Always blood."

In front of the fireplace a number of people were gathered around John Tierbaum, the critic, who had recently turned poet.

His "Lilith" which Jonathan Warr had brought out had winged him to a high place in letters. Claire Donnet wrote in "The American Poet" that "Lilith" almost achieved perfection and that she herself would have been proud to have written any line of it.

Jean agreed in the main with the celebrated Miss Donnet, but there were portions of "Lilith" that had no meaning for her. And Tierbaum refused to enlighten her. He had fixed her, upon that occasion, with his strange velvet-wet eyes and smiled enigmatically. There were parts of it, he had said, that even he had not been able to fathom. But she liked him. He had the face of a dark Christ, sad with eternity and yet unaged. People said he liked boys but chose to live celibate.

At the far end of the room, grouped around a table aglitter with glasses, bottles and dishes of sandwiches, shone other stars from the literary firmament. Olive O'Doone, the author of "Three Sides of a Mountain," was flirting with Gordon Kent. Jonathan Warr, ugly and affable, and Jules de Grenelle, the French playwright, were vehemently arguing the stupidities of American censorship with Jeremy Minch, whose own play, "Perfidy" (in which he had successfully achieved the sensational), was being threatened with suppression. Then there were a few undistinguished satellites,

and a few who would emerge presently from obscurity into the precious limelight of celebrity.

"But those who saw," Propatkin rumbled on in a deep passionate voice, dark and troubled as his memories, "those like me are like people already dead. We are ghosts, wise old ghosts, who look on at a comedy where the characters weep very much because the soup is spilled on the tablecloth."

Jean reveled in these evenings as a rule. Writers were more glamorous than other people. They were special. They lived with the creations of their minds in strange secret worlds and came out only upon occasion to mingle with ordinary human beings. You had a right to expect more from them, and somehow you could forgive them more. And knowing them added vastly to the reading of their books. They were always there in the turn of a phrase or in some particular character (generally the cleverest), and it was fun associating them with the literary images of themselves.

Tonight she was out of tune with them. She found herself studying their faces objectively and noting their physical idiosyncrasies which so perfectly matched their voices and mannerisms.

The room somehow was too small for them.

The young man with the blue-gray eyes stood out simple and uncomplicated as a straight pine tree in a vale of cacti that bore exotic blooms and exuded a purple fragrance.

"Here he is," Jude said, piloting him over to her. "His name is Dudley Crome. I told him what you were

thinking. Mr. Crome, Miss Hurd," he introduced them, and moved off.

Clemence Boone looked up again as he passed, and her anemic companion ventured a remark, but he strode on to the end of the room for a drink and incidentally to interrupt Olive O'Doone's progress with Gordon Kent.

"What did Mr. Taylor tell you I was thinking?" Jean asked him.

"Oh, nothing!" He flushed a little. "He gives me a pain!"

Ivan Propatkin's voice had grown deeper:

"Youth no longer youth, love no longer love. We know these things are. The eyes tell us so, but the heart does not believe."

"How very sad!" Nina sighed. "Do let me get you something to drink." She tried to get up, but he detained her. He never drank. He launched into the long and tragic incident of a nephew who had been blinded in a peculiarly brutal manner.

"I suppose," Dudley Crome remarked in an effort at conversation, "you are a writer too."

"No, I'm not."

"Then you're going to be," he hazarded. "You'd like to be."

She shook her head.

"Well, thank God!" he exclaimed. "I don't like writers much. I always think there is something wrong with people who are—and there generally is! Especially women writers."

Their eyes traveled around the room.

"Why are you here then?" she inquired.

"Oh, I was dragged here." He pointed out a frail youth who wore round spectacles on a gray bookish face. "Alan Stover has a job with Mr. Warr. He and I share an apartment. He's a bit of a nut too."

"What do you do?" she inquired.

"I'm with an investment house downtown."

"Like it?"

"Yes," he said. "It isn't terribly exciting—at least not in my department—but you know where you are and where you're headed."

She laughed to hide her disappointment.

Propatkin came to the end of his unpleasant tale.

"How dreadful!" Nina exclaimed sharply. "I shan't sleep a wink all night." She got up, distressed, and hurried away.

The atmosphere in the room prevailed.

Jean wondered why the egos and strident artificialities of these people had not disturbed her until this evening. Young Crome was difficult to talk to and what he said she rather resented. He certainly wasn't clever as these people were. By what right then did he dislike them, despise them? Yet, against them, he stood out young, admirable, clean. She found herself saying things to keep conversation going because she didn't want him to move away from her. She was glad that she was like him and not—well, a writer.

Suddenly she wished that she wasn't there in that room. They didn't belong there.

"We might get out for a while," she suggested. "It's very stuffy in here."

He stood up at once, his face lighting for the first time. "I'd like nothing better."

Ivan Propatkin smiled at her from the sofa. His smile invited her to come and sit beside him. He would tell her about the Revolution, about girls who had suffered terribly, girls even younger than she.

She saw Jude Taylor drinking with Jonathan Warr, and she hoped he wouldn't see her, because having brought her she was his for the evening; he had only loaned her to Crome long enough for her to discover that he was, what Jude had said, an oafish young man.

They managed to slip out unobserved. Closing the apartment door on a medley of voices eager in untangling skeins of complicated thoughts, they ran, like two children escaped from school, down the stairs and out into the April night.

They stood hand in hand in the harsh brilliance of a street light, waiting for a taxi.

"Where would you like to go?" he demanded.

For no reason at all she said: "The ferry."

"The ferry! What on earth for?"

"It's a vice of mine," she invented. "The call of the river!"

His impulse was to refuse flat-footedly. It would be cold on the river and who at night in evening clothes went riding on ferryboats for the fun of it! Its only attraction to him was that it wouldn't cost very much. It was the end of the week and his funds were low. But even if it hadn't been for the money, he would have given in to her about the ferry. That realization disturbed him unpleasantly. His idea had been some

place where they could dance. But maybe she didn't dance. She had said she wasn't a writer but he had doubts about that now. She was different certainly from other girls he knew.

The taxi drew up and they got in.

"The ferry," he told the man.

"Which one?"

"Oh, any ferry," Jean said.

But Dudley insisted upon being definite. Any ferry! The driver would think they were crazy.

"The Christopher Street ferry," he specified.

II

They drove there in silence and went aboard amid the din of drays and trucks and taxis. The rough wooden dock reeked with the acrid smell of exploded gasoline. There were a few nondescript travelers—a woman with a shawl over her head and a man carrying a big parcel wrapped in newspaper; three or four lone figures each going to some particular destination. Each mysteriously alone with thoughts that were particularly his.

Inside it was brilliantly lighted; outside it was dark. There were intervals of bedlam and then lapses of quiet with only the soft night noises of the river—the distant tooting of a tug, the hum and drone of the city traffic, the lapping of water against the black greasy piles.

"I'd think you would be cold," he said.

"I am—a little," she returned. "But I like it."

Slowly towards them came the ferry's brother, a long

gliding thing made all of windows ablaze with light. A bell clanged and quietly the dragon floated under its own impetus into the embrace of black waiting arms that groaned and creaked.

Presently a bell clanged in the belly of their monster. There was a clatter of chains as he shook himself free, a quick throbbing as he inhaled a great breath that set his pulses beating. The dark arms, moaning and creaking a little, released him. And he commenced to move, nosing out fearlessly into the familiar river.

There was no moon, but the night was clear and there were millions of stars twinkling in the sky.

The cold wind cut through the sheer fabrics of her clothes, and whipped the blood in her cheeks and arms and thighs. It whipped the blood in her heart. It seemed to whip her thoughts and make them race towards a consciousness of the immensity of everything.

They were part of it, this man and she. Back in that warm smoke-laden room they had been pigmies, little spun-off egos, uncoördinated. Now they weren't spun-off; they were woven, merged into something, a significant vastness.

She felt that he too had fallen under the same spell.

She thought of him as the man rather than by his name. Likewise she thought of herself—a woman, a girl—beside him, alone.

Below them the black water was frightening. The sky was a deep luminous blue. Far down the river were slow-moving solitary lights. And from the shore flashed a great electric sign that intermittently lighted up his face and threw it back into obscurity.

"Are you sure you're not cold? Wouldn't you like to go inside?"

"No."

He put an arm around her, shielding her.

The city was outlined against the night. It stretched like some mammoth beast crawled in from the sea to sleep or to expire. But it wasn't a beast. It was the work of men, a big work builded by little men who worked at it in order to live and who died presently. But it lived on, and would live on until some mightier power demolished it.

Thousands of miles of walls! Millions of apertures—windows that lighted tiny walled-off cells. People were asleep in them now. The whole city was asleep.

What a thing it was! Too big, too fraught with significance ever to comprehend. You could think of it only fractionally. But somewhere there must be the one big idea that encompassed it entirely and made it —what? Live? Perhaps. But where was it? What was it?

In her high inexplicable ecstasy she felt it near her. One instant and she would capture it—hold it, see it, and be for a moment as sublime as it.

But the nearest she came was to a not very clear realization of why she was there—with him. She had forgotten him. He must think it very strange, her not even speaking. She had said without thinking that it was the call of the river. It wasn't. It was the call of her deepest self.

He felt her shiver a little and drew her closer.

"Do you do this kind of thing often?" he asked her.

"No. I just felt like doing it tonight. I wanted to get away." She couldn't tell him that she wanted to be alone with him. He would quite misunderstand. He would think she was a cheap little flirt. Or worse.

That thought prompted the idea of a fantastic dilemma: suppose, for some reason, she were obliged to tell him!

"I wanted to be alone with you. I wanted to be alone with you in a free dark place, in the wind, under the stars, in the night."

That's what she would say.

"You're just a figure to me, a man. I don't know you, and yet you have the power to awaken love in me. And when love is wakened in me I will come really alive. I will be really happy."

And if she were forced to admit her fears:

"I am frightened to know you any better. When love is young like this it is perfect and perishable. A word, a touch, and it expires. And yet, a word, a touch, and it is strong with life, difficult to kill. Touch me! No, don't! I'm afraid!"

She glanced at him shyly, grateful that her thoughts were her own. What was he thinking, she wondered? She inquired.

"Oh, nothing particular," he told her. He laughed shortly. "To tell you the truth I was thinking of what Jude Taylor said."

"Tell me."

"I'd rather not."

"It was something about me! Now you must tell me."

"Well," he yielded reluctantly, "if you promise not

to be offended. He said I'd bewitched you. He's crazy. But I was thinking how wonderful it would be—if I had." He laughed again, embarrassed. "You're very pretty. Oh, you know that."

"Attractive—perhaps."

"No," he insisted, "beautiful."

She hated Jude Taylor for having read her mind so accurately. And how malicious of him to tell Crome!

"I guess he's in love with you," he remarked.

"Jude Taylor! Oh, don't be silly. I hardly know him. Besides, he's far too much in love with himself ever to be in love with anybody."

But the magic spell was broken. She was just Jean Hurd now and he was a quite ordinary young man. The ferry was an ugly barge that plied the same mile of course by day and by night.

They had reached the other side and sat waiting for the bell to clang, the wheels to start churning again. Life was quite prosaic. He would try to kiss her on the way back, and she wouldn't let him because she scarcely knew him, and there was really no provocation for it.

Caught on the plummet of that idea she dropped into an eddy of ugliness. The city was outlined against the night sky. New York. Noise and struggle, subways and sweat. Chiefly work: people sold into the slavery of jobs in order to survive—even old people, even boys and girls. The captain didn't thrill to his power as he piloted his ferry back and forth across the dirty river; he was a tired slave sick of the sight of the wheel-room where he drudged away the years of his life. How he must hate the clang of that bell, the invariable course,

the black greasy slip! Perhaps sometimes he had to fight against an impulse to run his clumsy craft crazily down the river and clear out into the harbor! And yet he never would do a thing like that, not in a whole lifetime. No, people did precisely what was expected of them. They were soldiers, automatons. It had always been so, masters and slaves. In the old days there were kings. Now there were alarm clocks.

The gong again. And a rush of water as the wheels backed and stopped and went forward, and the clumsy hulk scrunched slowly into its shelter. There was the bilgy smell of the dock again. And noise: the clicking of the davits, motors starting up and roaring off the barge.

"Where now?" Dudley asked, guiding her to a cab.

"We'd better go back, I think. I came with Mr. Taylor. I don't want to offend him."

In the cab he took her hands and held them because they were like ice. "I suppose he'll want to take you home."

She supposed so. "I don't want to offend him," she said again. "He's one of Mr. Keats' clients."

"Who's Mr. Keats?"

"Merrick Keats—the man I work for."

They found the apartment exactly as they had left it. A few people had gone: a few others had come in. Ivan Propatkin was still sitting on the sofa. He smiled, inviting her to come and sit beside him.

"I'm glad you came back," he said. "I missed you." His eyes admired her in the way that most men's eyes insulted. "Your companion is handsome too."

"We went out to get some air."

His eyes continued to appraise her, moving slowly from her face to her throat, to her hands. He inquired if she and Crome were lovers.

"Good Lord, no!" She must have looked shocked, because he apologized quickly. But she knew he had meant no offense. On the contrary, his tone of voice commended her; it attributed love to her as a perquisite of her beauty.

"You look well together," he said. Then his smile faded. "In Russia such things are more apparent, it seems to me. One knows at once. There we are nearer the earth perhaps, nearer the sky. Here it is different. Love is more rare. Am I right?"

"I don't know. I've never been in Russia. It depends too on what you mean by love."

He considered for a moment. His eyes fell again to her hands in her lap. He saw they were slender and delicately made. "Love as an ideal," he said, "as a goal. You must think often of such things." He smiled out of his blond beard, his eyes straying back to her face.

"I do," she confessed. "All girls do."

"But you American girls," he pursued, "I would like to know what you think."

An impulse seized her to tell him where she had gone with Dudley Crome; and why, if she could. It would have clarified her own mind. But people were going, the room was growing bare; and at that moment Jude Taylor joined them.

"It's time for good little girls to be on their way to bed!"

Propatkin was disappointed. Here was a girl who might tell him what the youth of this strange America was thinking and feeling. Now she was lost to him. He kissed her hand and said that he hoped they would meet again soon.

Jean rather dreaded the drive home. As they came out on to the street she suggested that Taylor put her on a bus that would take her within a block of where she lived, but of course he wouldn't hear of it. He chided her a little drunkenly for having neglected him all evening. On the way she could tell him what luck she had had with young Crome!

It was the price she paid for many of her most pleasant evenings, and so she resigned herself to it without further protest, knowing quite what to expect and anticipating it with boredom rather than apprehension.

Because she lived on the upper West Side, the driver was invariably instructed to go through the park. She was quite sure this one had been. Then he would commence. Jude Taylor though, being what he was, might be originally or at least amusingly objectionable.

"Well, did you enjoy yourself tonight?"

"Immensely."

"Where did you and Crome vanish to?"

"Oh, we just went out to get a little air," she said lightly. "It got awfully stuffy inside."

"Did it? I'm afraid I didn't notice it." His laughter mocked her. "What a child you are! Come, tell me the truth."

"There's nothing to tell."

"He appealed to you—a lot."

"Enormously," she admitted.

"And you had to be alone with him!"

"Not had to. Wanted to."

"And?"

"And we had a very happy time."

"I'm glad," he grumbled. Her willingness to trade bluntness for bluntness irritated him.

But it was often disarming, she had found; plunging conversationally into the heart of things created a formidable barrier behind which she was shielded.

It served in this case, and he was silent until the cab turned into the park.

"I didn't know you had a predilection for boys," he began again. "Your type indicates sophistication. Men of my age, I'd think, would appeal to you more. That's why you attract me. You do, you know."

"I'm sorry."

"You're a little frightened of me, aren't you? I'm the proverbial bad man, the wicked ogre, who gobbles up pretty little girls! But I'm not out to gobble you up! I could fall in love with you quite as idyllically as that young man could and, given half the chance, I could make you care for me."

"Those things," she suggested, "just happen."

"Quite," he agreed. "And love, real love, grows out of such a relationship. In the beginning, we must trust our feelings. You have feelings, I know. Warm, wonderful feelings. Come on home with me tonight!"

His remark was designed to shock her.

"Thank you," she returned laughingly. "But I don't feel that way—towards you."

"How do you know you don't?" He took her hand, and leaned close to her, a worn man, gross of countenance, sensual, vain. "Let me kiss you. Come in my arms and let me hold you for a moment. You're passionate. You wouldn't have that kind of mouth if you weren't. You're made for love, Jean."

"No, don't." She tore her hand free, pushing him from her.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Why be such a little prude!"

"Don't, Jude—please! You're behaving like—"

"Like a cad!"

"I was going to say—like most men. I hate to be mauled!"

"I'm sorry," he said, offended, and froze up in a corner of the cab. "You deceived me, I'm afraid."

Presently the cab came out of the park.

She wondered if men ever succeeded with girls by coaxing them into a kiss. The idea was insulting. Jude Taylor probably relied a good deal upon the fact that he was famous.

"I wonder if you'd tell me something," she asked conversationally. "What made you think I'd like to be made love to by you?"

"I told you," he retorted shortly. "The way you look. And women, on the whole, don't find me—well, unattractive. Why?"

"I was wondering why it seemed so—unflattering. Now I know."

"Yes? Will you let me in on it?" His tone was tinged with sarcasm.

She enjoyed telling him.

"Women," she said, "like to be *loved!*"

That seemed to amuse him inordinately. He chuckled and accused her of being clever.

"You *think!*" he said. "A fatal malady. It'll make you awfully unhappy. I'm a victim myself. We must have dinner together—and talk. No, I won't promise not to make love to you, but I'll try to be flattering about it. May I kiss you now? Respectfully?" He leaned close again, his eyes smiling.

But she refused. The beast lurked only a kiss away.

He warned her, as he said good-by, that he wasn't finished with her. If she thought he was incapable of love, she was sadly mistaken. He grew almost angry again in the memory of her defeat of him. She must dine with him soon! He'd phone her!

As she watched him drive off, held by a sense of elation and triumph, she saw a cab veer towards the curb. Dudley Crome jumped out.

"Hello," she said, surprised.

"Hello," he returned. "I followed you."

"Whatever for?"

"You know! I just wanted to see you got home all right."

His solicitude touched her. "I'm quite able to take care of myself." As she looked at him, a light of amusement in her gray-green eyes, she felt again that strong attraction towards him, mingled now with tenderness. "It was very sweet of you," she said. "Thank you."

He followed her up the steps and took the key from her hand to open the door.

"You think me an awful sap!" he blurted out suddenly.

"Oh, I don't at all!" She turned and faced him so that he could see for himself.

He started to say something and stopped. He stared at her hard through troubled eyes. Then he kissed her —quickly, fiercely, timidly.

"Good night," he said gruffly and pushed the door open for her.

"Good night," she returned, as shy as he.

She went inside and stood looking at the colored elevator boy asleep at the telephone desk. She stood there, a little breathless, blotting out the mauve-brown countenance of the snoring boy. Sweetness and an ache tingled up from her heart to that kiss still upon her mouth.

III

The next morning on her way downtown, catapulted through the bowels of the city, crushed and jostled by an army of job-holders who, like herself, wore the mien and aspect of automatons, Jean thought of Dudley Crome and hoped he would phone her.

The memory of last night refused to be shut away altogether with the dress she had worn. Recurring moments of it pitted their fragile perfume against the dank smell of the subway. The black water, the cold wind against her cheeks, the boy's eyes, the great city-beast with its lights and spires rising up against the luminous night sky.

It quickened the beating of her heart and she saw through her phantasmic dreaming the sea of impassive faces swaying to the motion of the train. They looked like animal faces.

Hanging to a strap, two blue-jowled apes were jabbering at each other. A girl with puffs of blond hair sticking out from beneath a tight-fitting white hat was a poodle. The man beside her, perusing a newspaper through spectacles at the end of an attenuated nose, was an anteater. There was a well-dressed buffalo, a thin-breasted gazelle, an owl, a horse, and a sea-gull.

The faces became confused with her thoughts, and she saw them not as animals now but as human beings to whom each in turn had come romance. Each impassive face could be lighted to love or twisted in pain or sorrow. And each subscribed without plaint to this dank-smelling journey for the sake of some one else he loved. The poodle manicured nails in a barber shop. The anteater wrote figures in big corduroy-covered ledgers for the buffalo, while the thin-breasted gazelle typed all day in a little cubicle high up in a building.

Emerging into the bright morning, Jean bought a red geranium from the wagon of a bawling old Italian, and took it to the office. The clay pot felt cool to her hands and the clean black earth soiled her fingers.

Elinor Stronach was already there, a blond girl with a plain weakish face and a body of whose voluptuous beauty she was ashamed. She had yellowish hair and nice blue eyes when they weren't marred by an expression of distrust.

When Jean first had come to work for Keats, Elinor

had resented her fiercely. She had expected to be promoted to Miss Agnew's place, and it hurt her to have a new girl and a younger girl step in over her. So greatly did she dislike Jean that she would have chucked up her job and sought another one, but her father was out of work and the family was practically dependent upon her thirty dollars a week.

Jean hadn't liked Elinor either. She thought her dumb and surly. But one day she discovered a story of Elinor's, a pathetic unfinished manuscript. She couldn't help but recognize Elinor in it; it was so patently Elinor. The girl couldn't write. She never would be able to write. It was merely a pitiable attempt at self-expression. Ever since she had been in Keats' office, she had written stories. They were all the same —about a girl of twenty-four or five who was frightened of men, whose soul cried out for love, whose virginal body hungered for it. There was always a scene where the man made love and the girl was tempted to give herself to him. She never did.

Now, in less than a year, the two girls were friends. Even the memory of their antipathy for one another had vanished.

Jean took the geranium into the inner office and set it on Keats' desk from where it reared its single red bloom in mockery of all else in that stale, dusty room.

When Keats had first started there in business, the building had been occupied by architects and engineers, professional people. Now its tenants were small rug dealers, Italians who trafficked in embroideries, Jews whose sweatshops were in Brownsville. One day

Keats too was going to move, but he was the building's oldest tenant now and he could owe three months' rent without fear of being dispossessed.

He had endeavored to give his offices a homey literary air, and when the gray carpet had been new and the tea-things on the low table bright with use, no doubt it had been attractive. Now the carpet was stained, the bookshelves clear to the ceiling were cluttered with old yellow letter-files and bundles of magazines tied up with string—the accumulation of fifteen years of agenting. And over everything hung a dead musty smell that made one turn instinctively to the windows. But the windows were always closed because Keats suffered from sinus trouble.

Elinor came in while Jean was tidying the big office. She stood looking at the geranium.

"Why don't you put it in there?" she said, indicating the outer office. "If *she* comes in, she'll ask right away where it came from."

She was Mrs. Keats, Mabel, Merrie's partner at home and in business, the mother of his three children.

"I'll tell her you bought it for Merrie," Jean returned.

"Don't you dare!"

"Did you see Ray last night?"

"Yes, but he was broke—as usual. I don't know what he does with his money."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"It's not my business what he does!"

A blond undersized youth who worked in a Broadway poolroom, Ray Bowers was far from Elinor's ideal

of a man to love and to marry, but he seemed to be her only choice. A subservient little man, Elinor could check him with a little flare of anger when he tried to get fresh with her.

"What did you do last night?" she inquired. "Did you keep your date with Mr. Taylor?"

"Yes, and I had a marvelous time."

She told her about Dudley Crome. The telling made it come real again and Elinor, listening, fingered the rough leaves of the geranium and envied Jean who could deal with men and achieve a sort of comradeship.

The ferry, the river at night, the feeling Jean said she had of being close to him, away, and alone in a world by themselves! If it had been she, it would have been fraught with ugliness, unpleasantness. He would have taken her there only because it was dark and lonely, the quicker to discover how far he could go with her.

"I wish I were like you," she sighed, and went out of the room because the little clock on the desk announced the imminent arrival of Keats. His train got in at a quarter to ten and it took him precisely eight minutes to walk from the station.

He was a small man with murky brown eyes, a wan smile that seemed as though it were controlled by a string inside his mouth, and the lingering traces of a middle-class English accent.

"Good morning," he greeted Elinor, and went into his office.

"Good morning," he greeted Jean, and hung up his

poor coat that he had bought years ago in England and still often pointed to with pride, remarking upon the durability of British-made goods.

He sat at his desk, reaching avidly for his mail as though it must contain something munificent.

It was, as ever, disappointing.

A heart-breaking business, this literary agenting! All you were was a middleman peddling the product of other people's brains, commanding neither the respect of the writers whose stories and books you sold nor the respect of the editors and publishers to whom you sold them. A go-between who for ten per cent of the amount involved did the dirty work of the author who wanted too much and the editor whose job was to buy for as little as possible. If one was pleased, the other was displeased. And the agent took the brunt of it. While at the same time he had to stand in with both: with editors, whose editorial acumen as a rule he despised, in order to sell to them; and authors, who were the most unreasonable people in the world, in order to have something to sell.

Other agents complained of having the same kind of thing to deal with, but somehow they seemed to prosper while he, who had been in the business longer than any of them, was hard put to it to keep his office going.

And the business was changing! Formerly an agent was a gentle person of literary mien who consulted writers as to what was timely to write, who coached and encouraged youngsters into becoming professionals, who felt in the end responsible for certain writers'

successes; while now he was expected to be nothing more nor less than a salesman! Editors didn't know their own minds. The merit of an author's work had to be talked up, exploited, sold to them!

It was, as he so often said, a heart-breaking business.

Yet a necessary business from both the viewpoint of writer and publisher, and becoming ever more necessary. A novel, in the light of a commercial property, had twenty-eight rights to it. Properly handled, a writer could derive income from it from twenty-eight sources—first serial rights, second serial rights, book rights, motion-picture rights, dramatic rights, syndicate rights, and so forth and so on. And what writer had the time to study these various markets? Each negotiation demanded a certain amount of bartering, a certain modicum of sound business judgment. And what publisher or editor of a magazine could keep track of the hundreds and thousands of writers in the world? Their needs were specific and urgent; and few if any could afford to maintain the corps of readers necessary to weed out the half-a-dozen needful and precious manuscripts from the mass of heterogeneous material that otherwise would pour in upon them daily. The agent sifted the chaff from the wheat; and well did he earn his ten per cent in the better prices he managed to get for the writer, in the time he saved both him and the market that bought his wares.

This morning's mail was barren.

Tossing the last letter aside, Keats looked up and saw the geranium. His murky eyes lighted for an instant as he thanked her. From where he sat the green

plant with its fresh coral flower framed one side of her face. The color of the blossom matched the scarlet of her mouth and there was something in the crisp upstanding leaves that emulated her youth.

A torrent of dangerous emotion surged upwards with his thoughts. He checked it with an effort and plunged into the cold business of dictating stereotyped replies to uninteresting letters.

In the year she had been with him he had come to depend upon her more than he cared to admit. He refused to admit it. It didn't do to let an employee get the impression that she was indispensable. If she had a natural bent for fitting the right story into the right editorial niche, if her estimate of a new writer's work was more often vindicated than not, that was what he paid her for—to be bright, quick, intelligent, to have the "modern feel." But if she felt that she was indispensable to him, he'd let her go. Perhaps he should let her go anyway. But that would be unfair—to her!

So he argued with his devils in the ordered hours of morning when the leaves of an innocent geranium diverted his mind from the service he rendered authors.

When the room grew gloomy in the dusk and the day's work was done and it was quiet with only the clicking of Elinor's typewriter outside, it was more permissible to let his thoughts carry him off into the somehow forbidden flights of fancy. Then he didn't care if she knew she was indispensable to him. His only dread was that she would leave him.

Then the flame of his secret heaven would splutter and expire.

In the afternoon a number of clients came in, among them Jude Taylor, who stormed and raged with Keats over the price the little man had induced him to accept for a story.

"You could have got double," Taylor thundered. "Peasely told me so himself. You're a hell of an agent!"

"Peasely's a liar," Keats protested weakly, "and it's most unethical of an editor—"

"Unethical be damned! It's your business to get me the top price, and if you don't I'll go to some one else who will."

Keats itched to tell him to go to hell, but he didn't dare. Taylor knew that he didn't dare, and enjoyed himself hugely. He went out glowing like a knight who had championed the cause of all writers!

He found Jean as alluring as ever and told her that she was a sad sight in her office get-up.

"Even in an office, my dear," he reproved her kindly, "a shiny nose is unpardonable." He bent over her shoulder and read what she was typing. "Poor little fingers! How much does old Keats pay you for breaking those pretty little nails?"

"Go away," she told him, "I'm busy."

"Marry money," he advised her. "Get yourself well kept. Do anything but this! Work's doing more to ruin the youth of this country than drink! When are you going to dine with me?"

"Soon."

"I'm free tonight."

"I'm not. Sorry."

The gray mustiness of the office stifled her today. It

had no relation to the night before. It seemed that you were two people, alien each to the other, one a cog in a machine that performed manifold tasks outside of one's personal volition, the other impelled chiefly by impulses and emotions.

Outside it was sunny. Even through the closed windows the noises of the street came up in a pleasant jangling din.

She took her letters in for Keats to sign. As though in answer to her prayer, he suggested that she go and see Percy Radcliffe, the editor of an important magazine, and take him Winslow Hamm's articles.

"And find out if he's interested in Mannix's story," he instructed her.

She waited for him to sign the letters. Because she stood close to him he took his time, carefully reading the stereotyped phrases he had used again and again. A little sentinel of grace and loveliness, he thought. A little servant waiting upon her master's bidding. A sprite from the shadows of a wood, cool and sweet, smelling of violets. How white she would look naked against the lichen-grown trunks of trees, her face dappled with mauve shadows!

The door opened and Mrs. Keats burst in.

She was a large heavy-bosomed woman with a scrubbed English face and a boisterous air of activity. She wore an unseasonably heavy coat and her face was damp with perspiration.

Her quick eyes took in everything at a glance—Merrie, Jean, even the geranium. She set down her satchel on the corner of his desk and emptied it of its load of manuscripts.

"Filth!" she ejaculated, with a sharp eye on Jean as though challenging her to deny it. "One would think that sex was the only thing in the world. Not that I'm squeamish. Never was. But in my opinion it's just a waste of time. There's not a thing there, Merrie," she turned to her husband, "that's worth bothering with."

Keats drew one of the manuscripts towards him and fingered it unhappily. "Certain Women," by Emily Hayes, it was labeled. Miss Hayes had brought it in herself and impressed him with her hard merciless humor.

"Wasn't this one any good?"

"Rotten!" Mabel ejaculated. "The worst of the lot. Written—if you call that writing—by a thoroughly diseased mind."

"Dear me," he sighed, "I did expect something of that!"

Jean took her letters and escaped from the unhappy air that Mabel emanated. She reminded Jean of a large red hen forever clucking and scratching the ground under her feet and glancing apprehensively about her with quick unaccountable movements. In her presence Merrie seemed to grow smaller and more shrunk-up. Her clucking and scratching turned him off as though he were a water-faucet. One couldn't help searching to find some reason for their union. They appeared so unsuited to one another. But doubtless there was some hidden sympathy, or there had been. Perhaps even love existed between them—that magical bond that ties two alien natures together like a couple of bits of string!

The sun had gone down and it was turning cold

again. People hurried along the avenue faster than the traffic. Animals again. An orderly parade of bipeds that had learned not to bump into each other!

The office girl announced her, but while she waited Mr. Radcliffe came hurrying out on his way home—a big genial man with a red face whom one associated with golf rather than with literature.

"Hello! Want to see me?"

She explained her mission. He took the envelope she held out to him and slipped it into his brief-case. He was pretty well bought up on articles, he said, but he'd have a look at it.

"But you're going to buy the Mannix story," she said, making it a statement rather than an inquiry.

"What makes you think so?"

"If I were you I'd buy it."

"Would you!" He looked down at her with tolerant amusement.

"It's the kind of story I always look for in your magazine and—and—"

"So seldom find?"

"Yes."

"Well, to tell the truth, I was going to send it back. I liked it. It is, as you say, the sort of thing we aim for, but the end isn't right. It's inconclusive, and our readers aren't the arty kind that like to be left up in the air."

Jean argued that it could be fixed. She was sure that Mr. Mannix could fix it.

"Well," he concluded the matter abruptly, "tell him to drop in and see me."

Jean called up Mannix.

"Change my story!" Mannix bellowed over the wire. "The hell I will."

"But you need the money, don't you?"

"Sure I do. But if you people were worth a damn you'd talk old Radcliffe into buying it as it is!"

"Well," Jean said shortly, "we can't. I made the appointment for three o'clock tomorrow. Let us know what happens." Without giving him a chance to say more, she hung up. She heard her nickel drop through the instrument, and remembered what Dudley Crome had said about writers.

She wished she were going to see him tonight.

As she made her way back to the avenue, a voice hailed her and the author of "Three Sides of a Mountain" greeted her effusively. Miss O'Doone wore a turban of sea-green ribbon and long earrings to match.

"What a nice time we all had last night! I do like Nina Warr so much. I've just come from Mora Gerhardt's recital. Plays exquisitely, my dear, but music just kills me. How is old Keats?"

She asked Jean where she was going and prevailed upon her to come with her to her apartment. It was only five-thirty and Olive had nothing to do until seven. And she hated to be alone. Why not be frank about such things? It amounted almost to a mania with her. Except when she was working she just couldn't stand it.

Jean went because of Keats. Olive O'Doone's new book would mean a good deal to him.

Olive's apartment was as bizarre as she was. There

were several low couches covered with different-colored velvets, and in front of each was an oriental tabouret littered with the paraphernalia of the smoker. The lights were dim, but on the walls hung weird batiks depicting figures of dubious sex held in the embraces of astounding beasts—the children of a brutish imagination.

She disappeared into the kitchenette and came out with the perquisites of a complicated cocktail. She painstakingly meted out the ingredients, chattering about nothing.

But presently Jean managed to inquire about the book.

"It's finished," she said. "I do pride myself on my cocktails. And this, my dear, believe it or not, is prewar stuff. It was given to me by a very old friend."

The concoction was sweet and sticky, but Jean swallowed it bravely and permitted Olive to refill her glass.

"It must be a wonderful feeling to finish a book."

"I hate it," Olive returned. "I always sink into the most dreadful depression. But this is the best thing I have done. In fact, it is probably the best thing of its kind that will be done this year. I don't mean that conceitedly. I'm as impersonal about my work as I am about other people's work, but I sat up all last night reading it through and I'm sure it's a worthy successor to 'Three Sides of a Mountain.'"

It lay on her desk, a neat block of script weighted down with a bronze reindeer, the title scrawled in Miss O'Doone's picturesque hand—"Enchantment."

"It's a charming title," Jean remarked. "Mr. Keats

will be delighted when I tell him you've finished it."

"I don't think I'm going to give it to him," Olive said. "There's something motheaten about him, don't you think so? Reminds me of a worn-out fur coat that was never what you hoped it might be. I'm thinking of going to Thelma Patterson. They say she's the livest agent in the business."

Jean removed the little reindeer and picked up the manuscript. "I wish you'd let me read it," she said. "I'll sit up all night. I loved your last one so much."

"Did you? I liked it too. I think I like it more now than when I wrote it. You must bring me your copy some time and I'll autograph it for you."

"Oh, I'd love that!"

She was obliged to swallow another of those sticky cocktails before she succeeded in getting away. But she took "Enchantment" with her and she was fairly confident that Merrick Keats would handle it. In the agency business, possession was nine points of the law. And that recompensed her for the sick dizzy feeling in her head.

IV

The Hurds had lived in the same apartment on One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street not far from the river for a great many years. When Jean was a little girl and the silk panels in the gilt-and-marble hall downstairs had been a vivid green, she used to think it was very grand. But gradually with the years the gilt and the marble panels were but further evidence of the fact that her father was far from the successful lawyer she had imagined him to be.

She found him tonight in the small bookish alcove that reflected him just as the parlor adjoining it reflected his wife.

He was stretched out, long and waxlike under the bluish reading lamp, in the old mechanical chair that had been the fascination of her childhood. What fun it had been to touch the button underneath the arm and see the footrest shoot out! This had been forbidden of course. But when no one was there it proved irresistible sometimes, until one memorable afternoon when the back suddenly dropped to the floor and nothing she could do would make the footrest slide back under the seat. It lay a terrifying sight of destruction and disobedience to greet him upon his return from work. Miraculously he fixed it, however, scolded her naturally, exacted a promise never to touch it again, and ten minutes later he was stretched out in it, his glasses on his thin nose, the big book in his thin hands—just as he was now. Aloof and inaccessible. Waxlike under the lamp. Some one whom you grew away from with the years.

He laid the heavy volume down on his chest and said:

"You're late tonight, Jean. We didn't wait supper."

She stooped and kissed him with a murmured word of explanation.

"You've had something to drink," he observed.

"A lot of nasty cocktails," she told him. "And on an empty stomach too!"

"Poison," he observed, and replaced the glasses on his thin nose.

"Did any one phone me?" she inquired.

He was already half lost in Blavatsky's "The Secret Doctrine."

"I don't know. Better ask your mother."

"Where did she go?"

"Oh, is she out? Probably downstairs with that woman." A frown crinkled his brow. Why Sylvia persisted in associating with that vulgar creature, he didn't know. Still, as long as she didn't bring her up to sit in the parlor outside his alcove, it didn't much matter, he supposed. All going the same road. Different routes, that was all—harlots, saints.

Jean went downstairs two flights to Josie Montague's.

"Come in, come in," Josie's rough voice greeted her. "Your mother's inside. Came down to visit me."

But already Sylvia had come out into the hall, a little flushed with embarrassment because Jean had found her there again.

"I just dropped down to borrow a book from Mrs. Montague," she explained.

"Come again," Josie's warm voice invited her. "Come whenever you've a mind to." She turned confidingly to Jean: "You know it's kind of quiet every night up there with him!"

"I don't want to drag you away, Mother," Jean said. "I just want to know if any one phoned me."

"Yes, a young man. I think he said his name was Crome."

"Crome, yes. What did he say?"

"He just asked if you were in."

"Oh."

Josie's eyes were smiling at her. "You can always tell," she observed out of the vast fund of her knowledge, "when a girl's interested in a man. But don't be too easy with him, Jean!"

Mrs. Hurd reluctantly followed her daughter upstairs. She knew Josie Montague was no fit person for her to associate with, but she did like to hear her recount odd chapters of her life. It was better than any novel she had read. Of course it was awful to think of a woman leading that kind of existence, but, after all, when you got old, who thanked you for being virtuous or held you to account for not being? And it did make for memories to look back on! What exciting memories had *she* to look back upon? Russell with his books! A hazy year or two when he must have been in love with her. But even then his spirit had been gray, and his search for happiness was in great volumes filled with long phrases about planes and karma and the shedding of one's body like a shabby suit! A few hazy years and then living on with a gray mind that had frauded her with a kiss and had left her as completely as though he had deserted her physically.

There had been Jean of course. That had made her happy.

Jean would have been as glad if her mother had remained downstairs. It would have saved her the dirge of complaints; the same sentences spoken with the same air of aggrievement.

"Not a place has he taken me to this winter. Not even at Christmas. And tonight I did so want to see

that picture downtown. But do you think he'd take me? Tired! Tired from the office. Other men aren't so tired they have to lie down stretched out on a chair. And, as I tell him, it must be just as tiring reading all that theosophy as sitting looking at a picture. Really, Jean, sometimes I feel I can't stand it any longer. You're out all day—and most every night!"

"Why don't you ask Mrs. Montague if she wouldn't like to go?"

"Because I don't choose to! It's all right dropping in to borrow a book, but she's hardly the kind I like to associate with. Besides, she's going out. *She* always has some one to take her out!"

Presently Jean managed to escape into her own room. She slipped out of her clothes and into bed with "Enchantment." She anticipated it with pleasure. Olive O'Doone might be a tiresome person to drink cocktails with but she knew how to write.

She had no sooner untied the string that bound the manuscript than her mother came in and sat down in a chair beside the bed.

"What's that you've got," she inquired, "a manuscript?"

"'Enchantment'—Olive O'Doone's new book. I've got to finish it tonight."

"Dear me," Mrs. Hurd sighed. "You reading in here and your father reading in there!"

Jean hid her annoyance and, setting the manuscript aside, spoke about the doings of the day at the office. Mrs. Hurd listened without being particularly entertained. She didn't know any of the people at Jean's

office, and she didn't understand about business anyway.

At last she went out, and Jean had the feeling of being released from a prehensile, devouring thing. Then pity for the woman swept her. For a moment she remembered Dudley again. Her mother and Dudley were tangled in a moment of yearning and pity and pain.

She banished them both from her mind and picked up "Enchantment."

"Clarissa," it began, "who was thirty-one, had had a great many men in her life, having acquired a taste for them at the tender age of fourteen when she had been seduced by her mother's lover. Her mother was both a knowledgeable and discriminating lady and therefore it was not very surprising that Clarissa enjoyed the experience."

Clarissa evidently was going to be a romanticized Olive O'Doone.

V

Love changed your chemistry.

It sensitized the film of your being and enabled you to receive more deeply-etched impressions of those who peopled your rather commonplace world. If you were of sound reason and you were to believe your eyes, the world was a depressing place. And tomorrow the mantle of your happiness would melt from your shoulders like the sugar cottage in the faëry story and you too would become sad and sour-faced and harried.

Merrie Keats was a pathetic little man with sinus trouble. Mabel was a puritanical old hen clucking disapproval. Elinor's eyes were always fear-ridden, and her lips would always be thin and distrustful. Mr. Hurd

mournfully enjoyed the nebulous content of a manufactured detachment, while Sylvia chewed the cud of her martyrdom and secretly regretted her virtue. And Olive O'Doone was ill of satiety and yearning for she knew not what.

Yes, the world was a contrary old man with the dust of dead generations on his stooped shoulders. A mean hungry old man with a dirty mouth and eyes full of avarice.

Only she with her fragile mantle of illusion opened her eyes to the joyousness of a new day. Rain spattered the window, the streets glistened wet, but a song sang in her heart. It sang above the carping of her mother's dirge, above the gray detachment of her father's waxen face, above the little bickerings that made up the office day.

Always now he was waiting for her. Or she met him. Or he called for her. The touch of his hand, the sense of his proximity, the light playing in those eyes that reflected his moods, told her again and again what she wanted most to know.

The telephone rang. Elinor said it was for her. Keats, literature, everything vanished.

The telephone rang at home, and her mother's voice sighing: "It's for you, Jean. It's that Mr. Crome again."

If only she were rich what fun it would be to plunder the shops of their finery!

The taxi crawled too quickly through the jam of traffic. His eyes admired her in the darkness, approved the dress she wore.

The lights in the theater glimmered low and expired.

The curtain rose to unfurl the drama of a tragic little soul.

Her cheeks were white lilies and her eyes were drowned with weeping. Love was so terribly sad. Why wasn't it a glove that could be thrown aside? Why wasn't her lover like Dudley to whom she could go and say: "It was like this." Thus and so.

The curtain fell and rose. It fell and rose again to blot out forever the crumpled figure that lay dead across the bed.

So soon it was late. So quickly it was over and she was in bed, virginal and lonely because of the mysterious convention of a topsy-turvy world.

Olive O'Doone scoffed at love in "Enchantment." She insisted it was nothing but the figment of a romantic imagination—a myth like Santa Claus or the faëries. You loved yourself, and you had appetites. You hungered for bread and you hungered for sexual gratification, but only an idiot wrote sonnets to a sandwich. Some people were more emotional than others; some more sensual. And there were a lot of unintelligent people who were sentimentalists. But they didn't count. One day and soon science would burst the bubble of romantic absurdity and then love-letters would be typed in symbols of chemistry. Blood and bones, nerves, tissue, glands. An organ that pumped blood and a corrugated substance known as the brain. That was all there was. Dig up a graveyard and see!

Mr. Hurd wouldn't have known Dudley Crome if he had met him face to face on the street.

Sylvia thought that he was a gentlemanly young man

but in no wise different from the others who phoned and came and spent their money on flowers and such nonsense. She preferred Toby Morrow. His father was rich at least. She read about him in the newspapers sometimes, giving art objects to the museum. The bearing and suckling of her child had woven no thread that transmitted the changed beating of the pulse of the one to the senses of the other. She was wholly unaware of a new note in Jean's voice, a new air in her bearing, a new softness to her lips when she kissed her good night.

They, whose very flesh she was, told her in their blindness what Olive O'Doone said so bitterly in "Enchantment": an illusion, a phase that young things went through, a tinseled snare to camouflage Nature's ugliest jest!

Wrap it about with bright trappings, as "Enchantment" said, girdle it with flowers, the invariable end was a mad tensed beast spewing its seed into the womb of a mate. A kiss turned to aloes in the mouth. A woman writhing in childbirth. Two aching milk-inflamed breasts. World without end, amen!

The Hurds knew that it was spring because the steam was turned off and the radiators didn't hiss any more. Miss O'Doone knew it too and blamed it for the number of men she ended up by hating.

But for Jean and Dudley it was spring.

They went often to green places in the country where the miracle of life emerging easily from the earth was more manifest. They held hands and kissed. Upon a hill, adrift in a boat upon a lake, they learned the circumstances of each other's life.

Dudley's parents were divorced and he had always lived with his mother and his Aunt Emily in Trenton. His mother and Aunt Emily did dressmaking there. His father lived in New York, but Dudley seldom saw him. He didn't like him, he said.

"He's full of crazy ideas."

"He ought to have been a writer," Jean laughed.

"He is—or he thinks he is. Writes plays that aren't any good. And gets drunk all the time."

He told her how he happened to come to New York. Pure chance.

"It couldn't have been chance," Jean said. If he hadn't come to New York, they would never have met. It was destiny that brought him. Destiny or God.

"Well, I'm glad I came!" he said solemnly.

They held hands and kissed.

VI

One day a tramp invited himself to lunch with them. The basket was unpacked, its inviting contents spread on the grass at the edge of a stream. He felt he couldn't have come along at a more propitious moment.

"I wonder if you'd mind sparing one of them sandwidges."

"Why, of course." Jean invited him to sit down. Dudley, resenting the intrusion, thought he had a hell of a nerve butting in like that. A bum with an unshaven mug and broken shoes.

But there was something about him that Jean liked. He had a young, angular face, misshapen ears that

stuck out from his head, and eyes alive with humor and mischief.

He said his name was Scott—Scottie, people called him. He had other names too—Tim, Jonesy, Pete, Skippy—but Scottie was his real name.

A friendly soul without secret or shame, he gave you unsolicited whole chunks of his chequered life in exchange for the sandwiches he reached for and gulped as a hungry dog wolfs chunks of meat, his eyes holding down his next choice in case it should take wings and fly away. He hadn't had a bite to eat for three days, he said. But no doubt he was exaggerating.

"Why don't you work?" Dudley asked him.

"Don't like to work," he replied frankly. Doing the same thing day after day got on his nerves and gave him the blues. He had tried it lots of times. Cramped his style, although he had had jobs at times, in the winter when it was too cold to travel.

"And when folks don't go out picnicking!" he laughed, his eyes glued on the last remaining sandwich.

"You take it," Jean said.

"Thanks." He thrust it in his pocket and dug rotten little teeth into the yellow flesh of a peach, sucking at the juice that dribbled down his chin.

It made Jean laugh to watch him. No one had ever enjoyed a peach so much! Perhaps that was the way nourishment should be taken—relished, wolfed down into a weak empty stomach, sucked at. Dudley wished he would move on. He was offensive. His rude appetite, his air of self-complacency, his instinctive realization

that Jean liked him and he didn't—everything about the man annoyed him. He was Anarchy laughing, laughing at him because he worked and shaved and wore decent clothes.

"If you ever tried my kind of life," he said, "you might get ter like it. I know this country pretty good. Been 'most every place. 'Most every city. Know even the jails."

"What do you do—steal?"

"Naw. Breakin' the law gets you in wrong, and you can't count on these judges like you uset to. They's just as likely to give you a year as ten days. Happened to a friend of mine over to Yonkers. He busted into a house for a piece of change and the judge threatened to send him up for life. Third offense. Naw," he said, "it's better to go straight and take a chance." He fastened his bright eyes on Jean, and wanted to know if the two of them were married. "I guessed you wasn't. But you will be soon. Well, a lot of luck!" But his tone was pessimistic. He had a brother who was married. "Coupla kids and a lot of trouble. Oh, an awful lot!"

"Aren't you ever going to get married?"

"Me, madam? Marry!" He roared with laughter. He would have to work. Punch time-clocks. Eat regular. "Jesus, no!" He was suddenly serious, almost solemn. "I might get to be like the rest of 'em. Factorians, I calls 'em—clocks. You know, I can't sleep with a clock in me room. Sends me crazy. Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick!"

"Well, where do you think you'll end up?" Dudley demanded irritably.

"The same place as you, brother," Scottie shot back. "You're going to get old same as me and kick off. I'll get killed ridin' the rails or swipin' a piece of change, and you'll die from hardenin' of the veins from easy livin'. In the meantime I'll be doin' as I please, seein' a lot of life and all that, and you won't."

He stopped, a little breathless from indigestion, and scanned the heavens, predicting rain.

"Well, I'll be pushin' on." He scrambled to his feet. "Thanks for the eats. You're not sore, brother? Maybe you'll have a good life too." His eyes roved to Jean sitting there on the grass, her knees drawn up, her back a lovely arc to the nape of her pretty neck. Because of her, he thought. Maybe it was worth the grind. Skin like milk, she had. And, Jesus, that mouth! To think that he'd have her, that galoot! Did it like he was taught in Sunday school with a clock ticking in his bloody ears. But that was the trouble when your belly was full. Aw, what the hell! He'd had his only the night before, a woman on the outskirts of White Plains. An old bat stinking of gin. "Aw, turn your face away, you bitch!" Bah, it made him sick! Better to be hungry and have the use of your legs!

He said good-by:

"You ain't got a piece of change to spare, brother? I'll pay you back."

Dudley gave him fifty cents. He gave it reluctantly, ashamed of giving it. But he didn't want to appear niggardly in front of Jean. Scottie produced a dirty little notebook and asked Dudley his name so that he might return the loan some day.

"Oh, I don't want it back."

Scottie didn't protest. "Just as you say," he said, returning the book to his pocket. "But I got a lot of good names in here. And you never can tell. I might strike it rich. Run into a gold mine out west or turn out to be a cousin of Henry Ford."

"I'll take that chance," Dudley retorted.

Scottie extended a grimy hand to Jean. "Thanks for the eats, lady. Maybe I'll run into you again sometime."

They watched his crooked form shamble across the field to the road.

"The dirty bum!" Dudley grumbled, giving vent to his pent-up irritation. "The nerve of him asking for money after eating up most of our lunch! And what gets me is that he thinks he's right! Ought to be locked up. That's how Russia is, I guess. Guys going around begging and thinking they're great because they don't want to work. You know, he *likes* to be a bum!"

Jean said nothing. What was it, she wondered, that she liked about Scottie and at the same time made her feel sorry for him? A rebel against what—time-clocks? A contrary strain in him, a strain of iron, that made an iconoclast of him, that made him defy the images of his kind and laugh at the soft refuges of his age. One day the gaff would prove too strong, and he'd give in. Her eyes roved to the road where he had disappeared, and she wished him well.

It was dusk and it was raining when they came out of the station and stood in the din of crowded cars

waiting for a cab. They went to Dudley's apartment, half a floor in an old-fashioned house, which in its charming arrangement portrayed the effeminate hand of Alan Stover. The first time Jean had gone there, Dudley had apologized for it.

"He isn't really that way, Jean," he assured her. "He just gives that impression."

Tired out from their day, they fell asleep on the couch and when they woke up it was night. Dudley had taken off Jean's shoes and covered her with a rug.

In the room beyond, she heard Dudley moving around. She smelled coffee. She lay there in the darkness listening to the rain outside, and felt tranquil. Where was Scottie spending the night? Didn't he ever want a place such as this, warm and sheltered, with the smell of coffee? She went into the kitchenette. Dudley, his sleeves rolled up, was bending over a frying-pan. His neck was strong, and she liked the way his ears lay flat to his head.

"Let me help."

"It's all done. Ham and eggs and strawberries," he laughed. "We can pretend it's breakfast if you like!"

"Why didn't you wake me up and let me do it?"

"You'll have enough of it later on. Soon," he said, handing her cups and plates, and kissing her.

Presently, like Scottie, their appetites were appeased and the desire for love came over them. It had been so before when they were alone together. Sometimes she wondered why she held herself from him, why he was never insistent. What was so precious about this virginity and why more dear to give than any subsequent

giving? Surely she did not believe that words had the power to metamorphose evil into good and make holy that which otherwise was profane!

Outside it was raining and they had wakened up and eaten a little meal together. Something very wonderful about that. Rain beating on the window. Warm and safe in here.

The echo of a forgotten age rumbled into her upon the thunder.

Two forms huddled in a cave against the terror of the lightning. Hands clasped, bodies close, less afraid because they were two. In the after quiet, in love, had she given thought to her virginity? Was it a prize she prized, a gift she gave, the badge of her virtue worn beneath a grass skirt? Likely he took her without thinking, as thoughtlessly as he ate his meat, cuffing her if she resisted.

They lay in each other's arms, cheek to cheek, each held from his desire by an artful logic that had been tempered in their mothers' wombs just as their mothers had been stained by the juices of their begetting. Church, State, the arbitrary judgments of bloodless hearts and cold minds that had stolen mankind from nature and frozen it into a hard mold of laws, modes, economics. Youth might rebel, nature could cry out, the dicta of long-dead generations was still strong in the blood.

"I wish you could stay here tonight," he murmured.

"I wish I could."

"Do you mean that, Jean? Do you really mean that?"

"Yes, Dudley."

"You could stay—if you cared enough."

"I do."

What held him then? What kept her silent, listening to the quick beat of her own heart? It were better surely to be scorned than to feel more tender towards him! If only he loved her more, he wouldn't think; and if he loved her less, he wouldn't think either. Yet, something within her rejoiced over that strange sense of disappointment.

And the hour passed.

VII

Jean met Dudley's father accidentally—curiously enough on the day following the visit they had made to Trenton to see Dudley's mother.

Jean was glad when the door closed behind them and they were on their way back to the city. The little woman and her sister, Emily, depressed her dreadfully. They had worn, anxious faces, gray hair and gray voices that sighed through their words.

Life was unfriendly.

Mrs. Crome had eyes like Dudley's, dimmed now and half-hidden behind spectacles. She kept them riveted upon Jean, following her about the parlor that was cluttered with the untidy paraphernalia of their dressmaking business, eager and worried to discover all she could about this girl whom her boy intended to marry.

She asked questions and Jean answered them.

Emily was silent and watchful. None of her affair! She remained in the background, a larger edition of

her sister, inferior and somehow on guard as though she expected her spinsterhood to be affronted.

It was difficult to associate Dudley with them. Difficult and disturbing. On the way back in the train she tried to think of nice things to say about his mother. Yes, she was dear and sweet. Yes, and kind. Yes, they'd go out again soon. She kept picturing their unhappy faces, their existence spent in making dresses for the women in Trenton in their cold cluttered house. That was where Dudley had been brought up, amid talk about fittings and linings and fasteners and scissors lost under a bolt of sateen. That accounted no doubt for the sometime narrowness of his views, his dogmatic convictions of what was right and what wasn't. Did she sometimes see the same thin look in his face?

Dudley's father was quite different.

She went to get a play from a producer on Broadway and was told that it had been sent to Mr. Barry Crome several weeks ago, and doubtless Mr. Crome still had it.

He was at home—a big room in a fine dilapidated house on Grove Street—freshly shaven and garbed in a tattered velours bathrobe.

"Yes," he admitted, "I have it and what's more I have read it. It's somewhere here," and he indicated an alarming muddle of plays and letters and books piled up in a corner. "If you can dig it out, you can have it. If not, I'll send it to you in the course of time. I don't think much of it, I'll tell you that. In fact, I wrote a play quite similar to it myself some years ago and it was bad then!"

Jean attacked the pile. Crome pulled up a chair and looked on.

He bore not the slightest resemblance to Dudley. He was short and stocky with his features stuck in his face in the most haphazard manner—one eye lower than the other, the nose crooked, the mouth crooked too. His hair, what remained of it, was a sandy gray that grew in two tufts off his temples with a sparse fringe around the back of his head that suggested a means of communication between one tuft and the other.

"What I need is a secretary to keep things in order, a young woman like yourself who pitches in and doesn't sit around and yap. Can't stand women who yap. Hand me those books, please. As long as we're at it we might as well get the whole damn' mess straightened out. What's your name?"

He pulled up his chair a little closer, superintending the operation as though it were an orchestra and he were its conductor.

"Jean Hurd, eh? Funny names people have. Barry Crome—that's a funny one too, isn't it? Look, there's some money. Pick it up. A fiver, by God! Thanks. It was a good thing you dropped in. You know," he let her into a secret, "sometimes I drink too much. In fact, I may say I get very drunk, and when I reach a certain stage of inebriation I go around this place hiding money from myself. Subconscious fear of being broke. Sometimes I have a hell of a time finding it."

Finally the play was found and the pile reduced to dust, letter clips and scraps of paper. The room had

grown gloomy. Barry Crome's comical face was dark in its shadows.

"I know your son, Dudley," Jean said.

"That's hardly to your credit, my dear." He was looking for his pipe now. "How is he? Takes after his mother, I'm afraid."

"We went to see her yesterday."

"How is she? Poor woman. Haven't seen her in years."

He shuffled about the huge room, as friendly and untidy as himself. The walls were cracked and hung with a miscellany of pictures and photographs. Books everywhere on tables and shelves. And nowhere to sit because the chairs held his coat and his shoes and his laundry in a clean white box.

"Dudley and I are going to be married," she informed him.

He looked up from filling his pipe at a fine, shabby secrétaire. For a long minute he studied her with a fresh startled interest.

"That," he said, shuffling back to her, "is surprising. You imagine yourself to be in love with him?"

"Very much."

"Dudley and I don't get along."

"I know. He told me. It's too bad."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he remarked, still studying her in the half-light. "Really a most unnatural relationship, father and son. Wholly artificial. What do you think of him? Honestly, I mean. Think there's anything to him?"

"Of course I do. He's—marvelous." She wondered why she didn't resent him more.

He threw himself into a chair and lighted his pipe. "Well, perhaps you're right," he said dubiously. "Tells me he has some kind of a job in a bank, and from the fact that he so strongly disapproves of me I imagine he leads a most exemplary life. Ought to make you a very solid husband."

"Solid!"

"Reliable and all that. I will say though that he has shown a very pretty taste in you. Makes me wonder. I'd say you were an intelligent girl. One can't be sure, of course. Beauty is deceptive. But certainly an up-to-date young woman, aren't you?"

"I try to be," Jean admitted.

"And self-supporting? Tell me, what makes you want to marry my son? Not a cent, you know."

There was nothing comical about his face now. His crooked mouth was pulled even crookeder by the weight of his pipe. His eyes were irregular dark sockets.

"Don't you think," Jean answered him, "that there's such a thing as love?—as falling in love?"

"Oh, yes." He had been in love himself. "But I like to know why I'm in love. I hate to think it's like contracting an illness," he said, "a germ, the result of unwise exposure. Take the time when I fell in love with Dudley's mother. If I had known why, damme if I'd ever have married her!"

"Now do you know why?" she inquired.

"I'll tell you. She was a virgin. I was always a big

coarse bastard. Unfortunately I mistook frailty for estheticism, too young to know that estheticism is only the other side of sensuality." What he should have done, he went on, was to have kept her enshrined in a niche like a saint and lived with a harlot whose body and mind were inviolable. But he didn't know enough. So, being in love, he violated her and then gradually stripped her of the qualities with which he had invested her until she was nothing but a wooden doll with the paint licked off.

"Hallucination," he assured her, "due to the divinity that's in us poor devils—more than beasts and so much less than gods. We hang the great qualities of our dreams on some one—like hats on a hatrack—and then we get angry and disillusioned when the some one turns out to be a perfectly ordinary cabbage."

"But that isn't love," Jean protested.

"Don't fool yourself, my dear."

His old form was sunk entirely in the shadows, his pipe had gone out so that no glow came and went on his face. No lines or crookedness. Only those tufts of hair against the window. And the sense of a bad good man who had paid heavily for his sins in suffering.

It wasn't the suffering of Mrs. Crome, however. His kind wasn't futile, and it didn't depress her.

Suddenly remembering the time, she phoned Dudley at the office and told him where she was. He said he'd come for her.

When the bell rang, Barry Crome switched on the lights and, coming close to Jean, he put a gentle hand on her head.

"I like to think that I'm fond of young people," he told her. "But I'm not. They only look nice. In reality they're hard and insipid—like unripe fruit. It's only the idea of young people that's pleasant. *That's* a hell of an idea. But I like you."

Dudley's face was tight, just as she expected it to be; and, as she expected, there was a warmth in the father's voice back of his casual greeting.

"Hello, my boy. So there's going to be a wedding in the house of Crome! Congratulations!"

He took a bottle and some glasses from the old desk and filled them with a golden liquid. "Sherry, and not half bad." He raised his glass and squinted through it to the light. "Hope you make a go of it, my boy."

Jean felt shy now that Dudley was here. She was an interloper who knew the secrets of two antagonists. Dudley was ill at ease and on guard—the least, least bit like Aunt Emily. A target for shafts.

"What did your mother think of your getting married?"

"She thought it was all right, I guess."

"She would!" Crome chuckled.

"And you don't?" He glanced at Jean, suspicious of what poison she had already been fed.

"Frankly—no."

"Why not?"

In a moment they were at it, arguing violently—the father amused, the son sneering and angry.

"You'd like us to live together, I suppose!" he said hotly.

"I always advise it as a prelude to matrimony." He

helped himself to sherry and shuffled over to refill his son's glass. "Ever lived with a woman, Dudley?"

"No."

"Unenterprising!"—and he flashed a twinkling look at Jean. "Don't tell us," he instinctively included Jean on his side, "you haven't even had an affair! When I was your age I'd had dozens."

Dudley laughed uncomfortably and turned a little red as he recalled a school-teacher in Trenton, a woman twice his age, a dark over-passionate creature whom he hated to think of now. She used to phone him at home when he broke engagements with her, and he was always terrified that his mother would find out.

"Well, I haven't," he said. "And it's late, let's go."

Crome followed them to the door, detaining them. He put an affectionate hand on Dudley's shoulder and hugged Jean close to him.

"Ask me to dinner when you're married and I'll bring my own hooch." To Dudley: "Never thought you'd land a girl like this. Shows there's something in you after all! Quiet wedding, I suppose. No folderols. That's right. Going to live here in the city. Well, glad you came. Got the play, Jean? It's no good. I did better myself with the same plot! Good-by. Be careful of the stairs."

Grove Street took them into Sheridan Square and east out of the Village. Dudley guided Jean quickly under the arcs that flickered and lighted their way. She wanted to dine down there in some little painted-up cellar with the walls defaced with bad drawings, and be waited upon by young men with girlish faces. But

she knew Dudley hated that kind of thing. It was associated in his mind with his father. So instead they went uptown and ordered their dinner from a neatly printed menu and ate it in the somber company of people who were dignified and refined.

But neither the appeasement of his appetite nor the atmosphere he approved drew Dudley out of the gloom into which the encounter with his father had plunged him. He wanted to know just what he had said to Jean, just what she had replied. And, betwixt spaces of silence, he kept breaking out in fierce resentment against him.

"He thinks everybody's a God-damned fool and he's some kind of a new-fangled Christ. What's he done, I'd like to know, except make a mess of his life! Always in that filthy old dressing gown. He had it when he was living with us. I remember it when I was five. Just an immoral old reprobate. I wouldn't care if he didn't think it was some kind of gospel he had to preach. Get drunk and sleep with all the women you can get hold of. That's his idea. And hates me because I'm not like him!"

"He doesn't hate you, Dudley."

"Well, I hate him. Imagine him talking to you that way about marriage—after you told him about us! What did he want? To break it up—turn you against me!"

"He has a right to say what he thinks."

"Not to you. Did he talk to you about whores? Tell you that they're the only women who know anything.

That's one of his pet subjects. He can talk a whole night about that!"

There was one, he told her presently, who was responsible in a measure for his father's degeneration. Violet Waters—yes, the actress. Now she was getting old and didn't do much on the stage. But the friendship—if you could call it that—still existed between them. It had been over her that he had deserted his wife. Miss Waters was married. She was always marrying somebody or other, but that didn't interfere with her life with Crome. In between marriages they lived together. Drunk all the time of course.

"And their friendship has lasted all these years?"

"Friendship!" Dudley said scornfully. "If you call getting drunk together friendship. Getting drunk and sleeping together!"

Perhaps it was even love, Jean thought. And it made her like Barry Crome even more. A blonde woman, she imagined Violet Waters, with a nervous beautiful face.

But she kept her thoughts and imaginings to herself.

VIII

From the attitude of family, friends, indeed of everybody, this being in love and getting married was anything but the romantic affair it purported to be.

In books and in plays it was different. There in a kiss, with the obstacles overcome, the curtain fell upon the threshold of happiness. In life, that curtain fell upon a pleasant prelude; hence why let it fall at all and take this hazardous step? Of course if you must, you must!

It evoked sympathy, it seemed. Although no one blamed you particularly!

Olive O'Doone said:

"Oh, don't, dear! You're so attractive! Although the first time is rather a thrill. I was only seventeen the first time. Didn't know a thing! A naval man, my dear. We ran off and had three glorious days. Then he sailed off somewhere and my people, who were furious naturally, found some slight irregularity and had the whole thing annulled. Who is he, my dear? I do hope he has money!"

Mr. Hurd's book slipped off his chest and he forgot it for the space of several minutes.

"Dear me, your mother will be more difficult than ever! Crome, eh? Mrs. Crome! Funny how you bring a girl up and then hand her over to a stranger. Even changes her name! . . . And you were getting on so well with Keats. You'll give all that up! When is it going to be, did you say? Good gracious! You'll be needing a little money for clothes and things. I'll do what I can." He reached for his book, straightening the bruised corner, and kissed her.

Sylvia was acutely distressed. She really didn't know what she would do! Not that she ever saw Jean nowadays. Out from morning till night! A nice enough young man, she agreed, but why rush in and marry him? Why not wait a little and see how things turned out? It wasn't as though he were well off. Too bad it couldn't have been that Toby Morrow!

She sat at the dressing table in Jean's room, toying

with the toilet articles which, every morning when she tidied up, she placed in a straight row. Each object was familiar to her. Now they were going to be removed from her, packed in a bag, taken elsewhere. The whole room was to be laid bare of its clothes and books and phials and everything that made it Jean's room. What an empty echoing look it would have! Perhaps she would put the sewing-machine there and the papier-mâché form she used now and then to fit a dress.

Against the reflected image of her mother's mournful face—the flesh a little loose and sagging under the eyes and chin, the mouth with its familiar mole below the fading lip line—Jean saw her own white arms, her own young body. Would she look, one day, in her daughter's mirror through sad selfish eyes? A nice enough young man, but why not Henry or Jim! Think what you're doing! Look at me! Do you think it's going to be any different with you?

The evening with Dudley had been so happy. Dinner and a bus-ride through the night to a bench overlooking the river. Beyond, the Palisades. The lights of an amusement park. Great warships anchored equidistant from each other spoke gravely of America and reminded them of the days when they had trudged back and forth from school. Fast tiny craft with loads of sailors cut back and forth from the shore. One of them and a girl sat on their bench whispering and laughing.

"You've known him such a short time, Jean," Sylvia said sorrowfully. "Not that I'm one for long engagements. But we scarcely know him. Two weeks from

this coming Thursday, you say! You might have given me a little more warning."

They had sat on the bench talking about practical things. Money. Where they should live. The sleeve of his coat was rough against her cheek.

"I'd think you'd be glad!" she said suddenly to her mother.

"I am, Jean, I am," she returned impatiently. "But I was your age once—and now I see you going off, doing the same thing!"

"But you were happy, weren't you?" Jean demanded.

"It takes two," Sylvia sighed. "Now take Mrs. Montague downstairs. Of course she's a different kind of woman no doubt. Different bringing-up. Maybe it's wrong to be selfish and all that, but on the other hand if you don't think of yourself, you end up like me." She commenced to cry. "I do want you to be happy, Jean. I do. I do. You're happy enough now, but I want you to be happy later on!"

Only Elinor Stronach seemed to understand.

She looked upon Jean, and saw her a deified being; she felt privileged to be her friend.

This surely was how love should be. It encouraged her enormously to see for herself that it existed. One day she too might find it. Not with Ray Bowers, however. Maybe it was just as well that he was out of a job and finding it incredibly difficult to get another.

"It'll be terrible with you not here any more. The place will seem dead. Have you told Merrie yet?"

"No, not yet. I'm going to."

"He'll be awfully cut up, I'm afraid."

Jean shrank from telling Keats. He had drifted into a habit of saying "we" instead of "I." More and more it was "we." What made things worse was that "we" were really going to move this fall—provided, of course, that certain matters turned out well. And sometimes she seemed to catch him looking at her across his desk or across the little table of a restaurant with troubled eyes. The eyes of a hurt whipped animal. For an instant it would cause a strange and unpleasant hiatus in their talk. Jerked their relationship out of kilter.

He was at his desk, pleased with himself and the hopes that a phone call had inspired.

A motion picture company had made him an offer for one of Mannix's stories. He had refused it and was what he called dickering with them. He wondered now if he had been altogether wise. A bird in the hand! Still, there was no use worrying about it. These picture people had to be kept up to the scratch!

The telephone rang again as Jean came in. A small affair this time. A short story. But by a brand-new man—Floyd Howe—whom Keats had taken on only a week before. He would have to admit Merrick Keats was a live wire! And it would encourage the poor devil! A man of forty, he was, who had suddenly been consumed with an unholy itch to write. Given up everything for it—job, family, even respect.

"Take a letter," he said. And he dictated it with the magnanimous warmth of a savior. Who knew but the man might be discouraged to the point of committing a folly! Even hungry.

"We really aren't doing badly," he remarked, in the glow of enthusiasm. "Things have steadily improved these last months. And there's no reason to suppose they won't continue."

"You should do better all the time."

"Oh, we will. Then I'll be able to raise your salary. And my own too!" He jerked the string inside his mouth and smiled. "Perhaps by the end of the summer."

"Well, I'm afraid I won't be here then, Mr. Keats."

"No?"

"No, I'm leaving."

"Leaving!" His face went blank.

"Yes, I'm going to get married."

"Married!" He felt himself drooping in his chair and pulled himself up quite straight. He jerked the string in his mouth again.

Some one whose name was Crome, he heard her say.

"I see," he kept murmuring. "I see. I'll have to look for some one else, won't I?"

She was only an employee. This was to be expected. They came and went as it suited them. Had their own lives.

"I'll be sorry to lose you."

Something of iron, thank God, was encrusting him in armor. It enabled him even to make a little joke:

"I'd have thought that all the love stories you've read since you've been here would have made you immune!"

"They're just stories," she smiled.

"And this is different!"

"Very different."

Banter. Glib words with the pain growing worse and the thin mask threatening to crack. They were phantoms of themselves fencing with ghostly foils. A shadow with notebook in hand coming and vanishing upon waves of sickness. And suddenly a geranium that long since had died rose up on the desk and framed one side of her face. The flower was bright, the leaves crisp at the ends of their furry stalks. He held it with an uncertain power that seemed to lie back of his eyes. At any moment it might fade and then the realization that she was fading, a fear that hovered just back of the geranium, would rush in assassin-like and stab him to the heart.

He had to keep talking too; otherwise she would get up and go away to type that letter. He wasn't ready for her to go yet. Her presence, the pain that the effort cost him, fortified him.

Soon, that pain hammered the news through his brain, he would look across the desk and see nothing but the emptiness of her absence. That emptiness would be a thing dimensional and armed with flails to scourge him. And he would be defenseless against it.

Fearful that he might not then be able to blot away the void by conjuring up her image, his eyes fell avidly upon her, feasting.

They knew how she was, exactly. The liveness of her skin, they knew; and how the mauve shadows fell and, falling to her breathing, changed the contours of her form. The slim waist, the navel—close, crescent-cut in the girdling flesh. Tiny blue rivers that traced their course over alabaster thighs. And those coral-hearted

breasts slumbering to the rhythm of little pulses sighing in her blood. They matched her mouth, those velvet coral flowers.

Crome was his name, she had said.

Mabel's body was dark. All the few women he had known had been dark, except Ellie. The memory of her made him wince. A servant in his father's house, nurse to a little sister, once with dreadful courage he had stolen into her room in the dawn of a cold English morning. Her corn-yellow hair and her coarse blondness had survived the years.

The thread snapped. For an instant he lost vigilance.

"I'll send off this letter," she said.

"Yes."

He sat there straining his ears for the sound of her in the room beyond, selecting her sounds from those that would be Elinor's. At the same time he gave himself up to his loss. Yes—looking across the desk at the emptiness—that's how it would be. Intolerable.

He got up, moved to the window. Crawling traffic, scurrying pedestrians cleverly avoiding collision with one another fascinated him. For a while he followed taxis, one and then another.

Then he heard Mabel. Her voice outside brought him hideously back to his dilemma and he looked about for a means of escape. He couldn't face her now. He couldn't ever face her again. It froze him to realize it —but he knew it quite certainly. He hated her.

IX

Love occupied her completely.

She knew with certainty those things which hitherto

had been at best conjecture. Yet none of them surprised her; and if they had been less she would have felt disappointment. The love that body made with body was the fulfillment of a promise; and sanctification. It was quick fire that raced through your veins and burned you clean. It was a tapestry of dreaming that your nimble senses wove into the quintessence of reality. It was a sleep you slept wide awake, drowned in tranquillity. And it was a flight you flew out of yourself and up through the ether of a strange freedom to an ultimate welcome little death.

Dudley was disinclined to talk about things like that.

Yet surely he must feel them or otherwise he couldn't fly whither she flew and lie awake dreaming. But afterwards he seemed to forget, or he confounded things.

You couldn't lump it all together under the general heading of sex. It wasn't. Not unless you completely rearranged your ideas and attributed to sex almost everything that was good and inspirational and above all creative. Perhaps you should and you didn't because you had been brought up to scorn sex as something sullying and base. There was scorn in Dudley's voice when he mentioned the word. He didn't know that there was perhaps, but instinctively he vested it with contempt, denying it the smallest measure of wonderment or glory.

It was four days now since they had pledged each to the other so long as they both did live.

She had stood in the little chapel high above the city listening to her love being sanctified in the eyes of God by words out of a stranger's mouth, while her parents

and Dudley's mother and his Aunt Emily and Alan Stover and Elinor Stronach looked on.

The ceremony hadn't impressed her. Beautiful and brief, in an incredibly few minutes she had found herself married, Dudley's ring on her finger and in possession of his name now in lieu of the one she had always had. The Jean Hurd of all of her twenty-one years was no more!

Myriad sensations, none of them pleasant, had swept her in those minutes, and then passed and vanished altogether.

Four days. But it seemed much longer. Time though was what happened to you, the effect of happiness upon your emotions. Growth through what the heart came to know and understand. The assimilation of adventure.

"Dudley, I wonder if I'm changed!"

"How—changed?" he inquired.

She paused in her undressing, her eyes fastened upon the play of his muscles as he stripped off his undershirt. Now, as he turned to the chiffonier to brush his hair, she saw the strength of his back, the strength in his legs. Admiration stirred pride in her.

"Well," she said musingly, "my whole life is changed. I didn't realize quite how much it would be. Living with you instead of at home. I always slept by myself. I'm not going to work any more or go out to parties and places with other men."

"Well, I hope not!"

"It's really like becoming a different person."

"It's just being married," he said.

"Yes, but it's different from not being married."

"Don't you like it?"

"Yes," she said slowly, "I think I'm going to."

"Think!" He turned to her, frowning a little. "Don't you like it now?"

"Oh, now it's perfect."

The frown deepened. Crossing to her, he sat on the edge of her chair.

"Isn't it the way you thought it would be?"

"It's better than I thought."

He knelt in front of her, and she hugged his head against her breast. His hands encircled her waist, caressing her, drawing her close. He studied the silk crumpled about her thigh and the pattern of the cretonne that covered the chair. Vaguely he was disturbed. Wasn't she happy? Why was she always going off into this sort of dreaming, her face still and expressionless, her eyes not seeing; and himself shut out? And then some such unnecessary curiosity as wondering if she was changed!

"You're always thinking!" he said, sitting back on his heels, his tone reproving her.

"It's the only way to find out things, Dudley."

"But what's there to find out?"

"Why—everything. You can't just take everything for granted, can you? I want to know what it's all about."

"But that's like taking the back off a watch and looking at the insides. It doesn't change the time or help you to tell it any better. If you had your way, you'd take the back off life."

"Yes," she laughed, "I would. I'd love to. Then I would know everything."

"Well, you can't." It was a good thing too!

"If we knew everything, Dudley, then we'd know how to make it better."

"Things are all right as they are," he told her.

"Some things, Dudley, but not everything. Haven't you ever looked at people's faces and noticed how unhappy they seem—as if they were always looking for something they couldn't find."

"Most of them are looking for money—like all the rest of us. They spend too much and get into debt. Or have too many kids. Or marry the wrong person. Or drink. But that's their look-out. Nobody makes them do it. And what's the use of thinking about them? We're all right, aren't we?"

"Oh, of course, dear."

"Well then!"

There! his tone triumphed over her, you see where all this thinking gets you—nowhere! Life, if you willed, was a beehive, but it didn't do to go poking at it with a stick. Stay on the outside and get your share of the honey and don't bother the bees with a lot of silly questions!

The scent, the warmth of her made his blood tingle; he finished undressing her, kissing her, and dissipating the little cloud that talk had blown up upon their horizon.

What did talk matter (talk that so easily became argument) or the unraveling of tangled ideas when thinking could be so completely annihilated by blood

grown warm and the melting of two bodies into one? Words flowed then of their own accord out of the heart, little words breathed out of loving. Then they were as close in mind as they were in flesh. One voice spoke and one voice answered back.

Then flight freeing you of yourself and the blessed little dying.

It left her at peace, conscious only of her glowing body growing cool and quiet, the pulses slowing and sweeping her pleasantly into drowsiness.

Now her mind was taking possession of her. It transcended her body and carried her in a crystal bark down a river that was wide and deep and silver. Skimming, drifting, leaping the years ahead, or backwards returning to re-create a moment out of a forgotten yesterday. Free like a bird with time no more and space devoured.

The night was warm and heavy, and presently she got up, lighted a cigarette, and sat in the window looking out at a pale waning moon. It was like a woman looking for her lover: she had lost her way and was hurrying, weeping.

Silly Dudley to scold her for wanting to take the back off everything in order to examine the insides! It didn't hurt a watch to have its insides examined, did it? Or anything else. True, it didn't help you to tell the time any better, but it did explain the mystery of the hands going round.

Whom had she talked to once about this thirst for knowledge? Ah, yes—Jonathan Warr. Over Howard Grimm's book on Prague. The sales, he said, were twenty, fifty times what they would have been a decade

or two ago. Then people read novels more, romantic literature. Now they wanted facts. The truth about dead men who had done things for humanity—soldiers, statesmen, poets. The truth about great women and about countries they might never visit, about insects and pestilences and above all about themselves. Facts.

"Facts to chase away hobgoblins," she remembered Warr saying. "In order to live better!"

"A question of money," Dudley would say. "Live better! What do you mean?" Everybody lived as well as he could. Generally a little better. Anticipating their hopes and their credit. He was in the banking business; he ought to know! Purely a question of money!

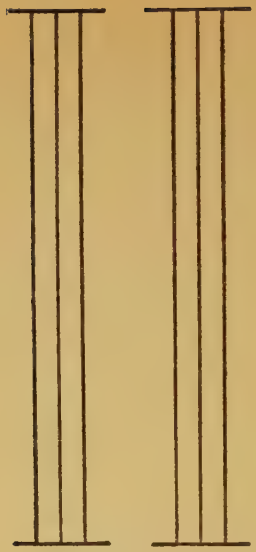
"No, to live better!" she insisted. Money didn't enter into it at all. Not the way she meant. To grow rich in knowledge. To employ it in living, living well, always better. That was it. So that at the end you wouldn't feel sorry for yourself; and in the meantime you were fulfilled.

Just as she was now, happy, satisfied.

Extinguishing her cigarette, amused with this argument that she had had with him in her imagination, she crept back to bed again. So far from her now! So lost in sleep.

She nestled close to him and passed a hand lightly over his man's body. So different from her own. Hard, sinewy. It aroused a new tenderness in her that mingled with a feeling of elation and of gratitude that seemed to come out of her very flesh.

And in the certainty of her heaven, knowing that it was eternal, she went to find him in sleep.



It was the second summer of their marriage.

"Well, I'm off," Dudley said. "See you tonight." He glanced at the clock on the mantel and slipped quickly into his coat. "If you really don't want to go tonight, I'll tell Geof in the office."

"Oh, I'll go," she agreed.

"Don't make a favor of it!"

"I'm not making a favor of it," she retorted sharply. "I'll go because you want to go."

He lighted a cigarette and flipped the match dexterously into the waste-basket. "Say, what's the matter that you've turned against them lately? You used to

like Dot. Or so you said. And Geof's all right too, even if he is a little dumb sometimes."

"I told you I would go, Dudley," she said finally. "Now run along or you'll be late." She dug her spoon almost savagely into the apricot flesh of a cantaloupe and tried to fight down her unreasonable anger against Dot and Geof Aldrich—and incidentally against Dudley.

Dudley's eyes flashed to the clock again.

"What's wrong with them?" he persisted, dallying.

"Nothing."

"Nothing!" He took his tone from hers and tinged it with sarcasm. "And nothing's wrong with Jim Drake or the Pilgrims or Ursula and Dave! You just don't like them!"

"No," she informed him, "I don't."

"Why not? They're just the same as us, aren't they?"

"Maybe that's why!" The retort came out involuntarily.

"And what's wrong with us?" he demanded, logically enough.

"Now do go, Dudley."

She hated these early morning bickerings. She hated the things she said. It was bad enough thinking them.

Dudley stood there stubbornly. He didn't care now if he was late. They might as well have this thing out here and now and get to the bottom of it. But looking at her, he changed his mind and said mildly:

"It's because of the way you feel. I'll tell Geof we've got another engagement and we'll stay home."

"No, I'd rather go."

"Oh, I don't care, Jean. Honest."

"We'll go, Dudley," she insisted.

"Oh, all right. See you tonight. So long."

The door slammed, and she was left with tears in her throat that made her abandon her breakfast.

And tonight the Aldriches!

Another evening of bridge played to the tune of Geof's wisecracks and grimaces that made Dot giggle and chide him. "Now stop it, Geof. And play. It's your bid. I passed and Jean said a heart!" If Geof had a bottle of gin he would drink most of it and get comically amorous. He'd sit on Dot's lap and slide off because she was pregnant now and had no room for him any more. "We've thought up a new name for it, Dud! We're going to call it Don't if it's a girl and Do if it's a boy!"

"Now stop it, Geof!" giggling and blushing and demurely arranging her dress over the scarcely perceptible prominence.

If you hadn't been told, you wouldn't have known; but already they were the proud parents of a bouncing baby who henceforth would be the guide rope to their joint existence. It would come into the world according to rote and upon its coming they would go into the country. The little house was already picked out. Geof was getting together a sum sufficient to secure it so that after a long time it would be theirs. And they were looking forward to it, reveling in the anticipation of this further step that would press them more firmly into the uniform mold.

It was the right thing to do! That's why they did it. Because, as you could see, everybody did it.

And after a long time they would own their own car, and the furniture would be paid up, also the Frigidaire and the radio. Geof would take up golf. Maybe Dot would too. And in time they would belong to the country club—unless a couple of accidental and unprepared-for Do's or Don't's came along over and above the Little Brother that Dot had already decided upon!

And Jean apparently was headed that way too.

"What's wrong with it?" Dudley wanted to know. "Isn't that what everybody does after they've been married awhile—settle down some place?"

The sword once bright live-edged steel was already a little dull through usage; now it should be taken some place to rust!

"That's the trouble with you! Wanting to be different! Where does it get you?"

"I don't want to be different."

"Well, what *do* you want?"

That phrase that she had heard so frequently of late rang in her ears as she went about the simple work of the apartment. It could be done in an hour if she kept at it, but sometimes she let it drag out until the middle of the afternoon. The dishes, the beds, a little dusting and sweeping, and sometimes a basin full of Lux and stockings.

But these things were nothing. They made you neither happy nor unhappy. You could scrub greasy pots and pans in high spirits or in low or without being

really conscious of yourself at all. Feeling neither one thing nor another, not dutiful or virtuous or married or lonely.

That was how she had felt at first—after the novelty of new eggbeaters and dishtowels had worn off. Then life was acutely Dudley and being in love—hurt and made happy, made happy and hurt. A volatile existence of strong consciousness.

"Well, what *do* you want?"

This, the second summer of her marriage, she had spent at Mildeen, Connecticut, a village once famous for its boats and fisheries.

They still built boats there and went out in them to fish, but it wasn't, so she was told, what it used to be! Then sons were born to the sea and women grew brown and withered and toothless with the eternal smell of fish in their souls. Fish and Bibles. Schooners were wrecked on the treacherous rocks off Glover's Point or off the Island which old man Stedman had owned and where he used to live with all his money and three wives. Brave rescues were made in the flare of torches while little bands of shawled and shivering figures waited and prayed on the beach!

Now it was all different. Only the myths and a few feeble octogenarians survived.

Jean loved it though and freed herself quickly of that discontentment that had even then crept into her happiness, gnawing it like maggots. She loved the pines that grew down to the sea, and the sunsets that flamed back of them at nightfall. There were nooks secluded and cool where she read or lay stretched out on pine

needles dreaming up into an endless canopy of blackness. There were boats beached on the sand baked clean of their fishy stench and the Island with old man Stedman's house crumbling into ruins.

Dudley came down every week-end; she had looked forward to his coming. She met him at the station and watched for him to jump off the train with his bag.

Her fears vanished. Her love like a wilted flower revived. And she had been able to lay her discontent to the city and the winter and to reaction perhaps from the too high happiness of the months before.

She had been back only two weeks now, but from the very first hour this pall seemed to have fallen upon her again. Dudley coming and going. Dot and Geof, or the Pilgrims, or Ursula and Dave. The mold gaping abysmally below her. Dudley's mind and volition pushing her to its brink, pointing out its advantages, exemplifying its virtues in Geof and Dot, coaxing her, urging her, growing impatient at last and saying:

"Well, what *do* you want?"

Certainly not this!

But this—the merciless whip of her thinking lashed her—was Dudley whom she loved, whom she had married.

You couldn't sever him from his ideas any more than you could dissociate him from his friends. There would be other Geofs and Dots and Floyd Howes. Those were his tastes, as innately his as the shape of his head or the slant of his gray-blue eyes. You couldn't quarrel with them or talk them into different patterns.

On the other hand, how were you to think yourself

into a different pattern? You might make up your mind to join in the fun and giggle with Dot at Geof's antics, but when the time came your laughter sounded empty and deliberate. You might also tell yourself that everything was the same now as it had started out to be. You had Dudley for husband, for lover. He took you with the same ardor. He certainly hadn't changed. Not an iota. Neither had you. You were the same Jean; utterly the same.

Yet you were unhappy. Why not admit it? The pleasantest hours were spent with Alan Stover, curiously enough, who had turned out to be your friend, not Dudley's.

This strange, indeterminately gendered youth interested her. Last winter and spring he used to sneak off early from work and they'd go walking together in the park. Round and round the frozen reservoir, the wind biting their cheeks, talking and talking. Once he shocked her by saying that at one time he had thought he was in love with Dudley. It wasn't being in love, he explained, it was *like* being in love. A sort of worship.

"I wanted to be like him, strong and tall and rough. You know what I mean. I loved him, Jean, for what he was. Is, I should say. I used to try and copy him—the way he stood, and walked, and came into the room, the way he dressed and undressed. You know. Even the way he smoked."

These hours were really stolen because Dudley always scowled when she told him. There was no harm in it, he supposed; Alan was all right in his way, but what did she want to go walking with him in the

A Howard Hughes Production. *The Age for Love.*

IT WAS AT NINA DONNET'S THAT JEAN FIRST MET DUDLEY.

park for? What did she see in him? What was there to talk to him about? If she wanted to go walking why didn't she call up Dot or Ursula?

She hadn't seen Alan since her return from Mildeen, and she wondered about him. Suicide was so often in his mind. Long spells when he struggled in the grip of a terrible depression, when the bleakness of his existence became well-nigh intolerable. If only he had courage! he used to say. She had it, he insisted. But it had been entirely left out of him with a lot of other qualities.

He was in her mind when presently the telephone rang. She answered it, hoping it would be he.

It was Elinor Stronach.

"Hello, Jean. When are you coming in? Mr. Keats wants to talk to you."

Then Merrie's voice with a ring of cheeriness to it: "Hello there! How is the Lady of Leisure? I heard you were away all summer."

"How are you?"

"Oh, I'm all right, Jean."

"And business?"

"Well, that's something else again!" He chuckled and stopped. "I had quite a misfortune this summer, you know. My wife died."

"Your wife—!"

"Yes—Mabel." His voice told her he was resigned now to his loss. "It was quite sudden."

She blurted out commonplace words, not knowing what to say.

"I wonder if you'll have lunch with me today. I want to see you."

"Why—yes," she accepted and hung up, shaken by the news of Mabel's death. It didn't seem possible. Mabel was so strong, so boisterous. If it had been Merrie, it would have been so much more credible.

II

Merrie was closeted with Floyd Howe—who at forty had become a writer.

In the short span of a year Howe had made a name for himself. He wrote by day and by night, Elinor said, and turned out more stuff than ten other writers put together. Making up for lost time. Poems, stories, novels. Two novels already and both splendid. The first one would be out next month.

She told Jean about Mabel:

"She got hit by a car up where they live. It just brushed by her and knocked her down. She didn't think she was hurt at all, just shaken up. She was on her way down here. She sat right where you're sitting now, Jean, telling me about it. But a couple of days later, on a Thursday, she collapsed. Judy came in and found her lying on the kitchen floor. Bleeding to death. Poor little kid was scared out of her wits but, d'you know, she had the presence of mind to keep Henry and the other one—Dorcas—out. I think that was darn' brave of her, don't you? She took some money out of her mother's bag and sent the two of them to the movies. Then they took her to the hospital but it was too late, I guess."

And then about herself:

"Oh, everything is just about the same."

She still saw Ray Bowers off and on. He was back in the poolroom at his old job but he was looking around for something better.

"He really wants to get on and make something of himself," Elinor said. "The poor kid didn't get much of an education—and then there isn't an awful lot of push to him."

She dropped her voice and spoke of Floyd Howe again:

"He's really awfully nice, Jean. You've no idea. I've been out to lunch with him a couple of times and once in a while he drops in late in the afternoon and stays on talking to me. Oh, about everything. Himself and his work—and life, you know. His wife practically kicked him out when he chucked up his job to be a writer. Now that he's a success she wants him back. He isn't going, of course, but he's got two kids—Vernon and Walter—and naturally he doesn't want to lose them."

"No, naturally."

"One's nine and the other's seven. He asked me what I'd do, and I said I'd go back. Don't you think I was right? He wants me to go out to dinner with him tonight but I'm not going."

"Why not?"

Elinor was frightened of the friendship that was growing up between them. A girl couldn't be friends with a man. The talk, the confidences, were only dust thrown in one's eyes, bait to lure one into the inevitable

web. One day it would happen—over dinner perhaps. It must. It was inevitable. She'd say no of course and then the friendship would have to be abandoned, scuttled like a leaky ship. Feelings would be hurt. And where before there had been sweetness, there would be bitterness and scorn.

They came out of the office together—Keats and Floyd Howe. A coming man now, this Howe, this miserable creature of yesterday, and only meet that Keats should walk with him to the door, a brotherly hand on his shoulder.

"Ah, how are you, Jean? You know Mr. Howe! You were with me when we placed his first story, weren't you? He's done fine things since then."

He stood, a changed individual from the frightened animal that had been driven to the pen by an incomprehensible fire, reincarnated by a little cheap success, smiling quiet acknowledgment. More orderly than before, minus that mad look in the eyes, still bald of course, and adhering in dress and in manner to a set of new conventions: modest, self-assured, moneyed.

Jean preferred the old Howe. There had been something in him then kindred to Scottie. The glory of an Ishmaelite. That was gone now. Society had let him in, patted him on the back, told him he was all right. Robbed him completely of the fine fierce hunger that had made him a hating thing, a man above the others.

"Well, good-by, Merrick."

"Good-by, old man! Glad you dropped in."

Howe walked over to Elinor and bent over her chair, talking to her in a low voice.

Jean followed Keats back into his office.

Everything was the same. The windows closed and grimy. The old gray rug, the tea-things a little more tarnished on the low table; the shelves, the files, the books. Different manuscripts littered the desk. "Enchantment" now a book, a best-seller, wanton-looking in a challenging red wrapper. Advance copies of "Vestments" by Floyd Howe—a nice stack of periwinkle blue. And Keats himself, a small worried wisp with murky eyes and thin hair growing away from the blue-veined brow. He wore a mourning band around the sleeve of his coat and, if she were not mistaken, a spryer air. The least bit jaunty in his widowerhood.

"The same old place, Jean," he said, following her gaze about the room. "Let's get a bite of lunch."

They went out to the same little restaurant.

"Like old times," he jerked a smile at her across the table. "Nice to have you here." His eyes fell to her blouse, and he was reminded of Mabel. "Mrs. Keats' death broke me up. I'm just beginning to feel like myself again. It was very sudden."

Jean listened again to how Mabel was struck by the car, and how Judy had found her and prevented Henry and Dorcas from seeing their mother so, bathed in blood. Judy was quite a heroine. Her deed surmounted in importance the mother's dying.

"Now tell me about yourself. How is marriage?"

"It has its advantages," Jean smiled.

"And its disadvantages, eh?"

"Well—nothing is perfect," she said.

"And no little Cromes upon the horizon?"

She shook her head, hoping that her voice wouldn't betray her. But what if it did! Why this instinctive secrecy? Suppose she said:

"Yes, I'm pregnant. A few weeks. No, I'm not looking forward to it at all."

They went on with their lunch to the coffee.

He told her about the business, the fine progress Floyd Howe had made, the success of "Enchantment," new clients who had come to him. All in all, a satisfactory year. Could have been better of course. Now he was going to move. Had to. The building was coming down. Had to get out by the first of next month, the fifteenth at the latest. He'd like her to go with him and have a look at one or two places he had in mind. One on Forty-fifth Street he liked especially. More space than he needed and too much rent, but he'd take it with an eye to branching out a bit, and going in seriously for the play end of the business.

"We've never really scratched it," he explained, lapsing into that "we," "but there's a lot in it. I'd like you to come in with me. There's a man who's anxious to join me—and he'd take care of his end of things financially—but I'd much rather have you."

"I'm afraid I couldn't."

"Why not? Not as an employee, you understand. As a sort of partner." The memory of the torment she caused him was acute. He hungered for it. Sharp exquisite pain that sank him into a brooding despair. A starved mongrel pressing a hot muzzle against the cruel wire of a dovecote. But it was not on that account that he was impelled to be generous to her. She

had a definite commercial value. A manner that ingratiated, a directness that inspired confidence, the knack of driving an adversary into a decision. The other thing—that she would be a goddess just beyond the periphery of his hopes—was entirely a secondary consideration.

"If we made a go of it, you'd make a splendid income, Jean."

"Yes, but Dudley doesn't want me to work."

"Well, of course if the money isn't a consideration there's really no point to it. It's hard work, I realize that."

"I'd like to do it," she confessed, "but I can't."

In a few months, by Christmas, the form of her body would commence to change. In May there would be a little bundle of pink flesh that would demand her every attention. They were poor now. That is, bound to a very limited scheme of living that excluded luxury or pleasure. Then there would have to be a rebudgeting of expenditures to make provision for three instead of two and in consequence they would be poorer or, if Dudley got the raise in salary he expected, at least no richer. A new suit for Dudley would still be a difficulty; a theater still an extravagance.

Keats' jauntiness vanished.

"Of course I don't want to persuade you against your will," he said, plainly disappointed. She knew best what she wanted to do. But he thought that now, after more than a year of marriage, of—what should he call it?—devotion, she might be a little tired of housekeeping. And this was a fine opportunity. Thelma Patterson had

had a marvelous year. So had the Ditmore people. Jeremy Minch's new play alone was covering their entire office expense.

"I'd like to awfully, but I can't."

"Well, you know best," he said again.

He'd have to take Goodleaf in, he supposed. Nice fellow in many ways, and with quite a good knowledge of the business, but not exactly the personality he liked to have around. Much prefer to have her. Oh, much prefer her, but she knew best!

She went with him, however, to look at the place on Forty-fifth Street. A few precious square feet high up in a new building that still smelled of plaster and varnish.

If she were going to be with him, he'd arrange it so and so. Knock up a partition there with a door between her office and his. Give her the corner with the two windows. He didn't mind a little darkness. And the outer office, where Elinor and perhaps another girl would sit, he'd shelve clear up to the ceiling, and put a rail there, leaving just room enough for a couple of chairs and a hatrack.

She kept thinking that if she were to come with him, she would use her own name—Jean Hurd—and not Mrs. Crome. It was ridiculous because she had no intention of coming with him. It was impossible.

But she saw just how her office would be—the desk there, the light coming in from the back, the bookshelves flanking the other window, low bookshelves with pots of flowers on top. And pictures—sketches which from time to time she would acquire.

Her own office with MISS JEAN HURD in gold letters on the door if she liked! A buzzer to summon Elinor or the other girl. Manuscripts, phone calls, visitors upon special errands. Decisions, discussions, opinions. Hopes, disappointments, enthusiasms and regrets.

Hers for the taking but for the flower of love!

A little seed in her uterus, a chemical fertilization, a welded duplication of something of her and something of an alien nature; and a man whose name was Goodleaf would sit at *her* desk and labor in *her* vineyard!

They came out of the building and into the roar of traffic—motors, klaxons, the shrieking of brakes, and snatches of talk like disjointed bars of popular tunes.

"Taxi, taxi!"

"*I* told *him* where to get off, the dirty crook!"

"No, I ain't seen it yet but I hear it's swell!"

"'What,' I says, 'what! Say that again an' . . .'"

"It's got to go up, I tell yer, because of the merger. It's a cinch for ten points!"

They drove back to the building that was soon to be demolished.

"Come on up. I'm expecting Miss O'Doone."

"No, I can't. I've got to go." The dull little man was king of a glamorous kingdom. His battered old hat was a crown. A lady of literary prominence was waiting for him in his chambers, and he would grant her an audience!

She had no place there, and the familiar things would hurt her.

She belonged to a more commonplace world. Mrs.

Crome—Apartment 4-D, Mrs. Brown, 3-D, and Mrs. Smith, 5-D. Lamb chops and hashed brown potatoes, and tomorrow night a roast. Laurel Manor, only forty minutes from Broadway and dozens of trains a day. Paved streets, splendid schools, every modern convenience. 24 Maple Avenue—right across from the Aldriches. An extra large lot, view front and rear, sun porch and fireproof garage. See Jonas J. Kilwacker, Realtor, 362 Main Street, Telephone Main 53. Jonas J. Kilwacker, Realtor, specializing in Laurel Manor Values!

"Good-by. And thanks. I do appreciate it, you know that."

III

Free to go where she pleased—provided it didn't cost more than seventy-five cents—she walked aimlessly, unhappily, to the corner and then decided to go and see Dudley's father. The poor old man had been laid up with an infection of his eyes.

From bad booze, Dudley said. Always knew he'd go blind or something!

But it wasn't from bad booze. The doctor said it could happen to anybody.

He was better today, but the pain was still bad if he bared his eyes to the light. All right so long as he kept the bandages on.

"How are you, my dear? Good of you to come. What's that? Fruit? Great! Peel me one of those pears. Just what I'd like. Violet was here. Brought me a little wine. Too bad you missed her. How is Dudley?"

"Oh, he's all right."

"Glad to be back in town?"

"Oh, I don't know. There! Would you like something to drink with it—some milk?"

The air in the room was close and strong with a medicinal odor. She opened the windows and straightened up a bit, trying to throw a note of cheeriness into her voice as she answered his questions.

No, there was really no news. Dudley was expecting a raise. It was due now but maybe they'd make him wait till the first of the year. No, they hadn't seen a thing; theaters were so expensive.

But evidently she failed, because presently he charged her with sounding a little blue.

"It's nothing," she said. "Every one feels a little blue sometimes."

The temptation to confide in him was strong, but she fought it down, because so long as she kept it locked in her heart, it was a mood, a phase that something or nothing might dissipate. Wake up one morning and feel different. New point of view. But to let it out would be to give it substance, form. Then it would be a thing that he could speak of tomorrow and remember after it no longer existed. Jean's trouble! A concrete malady like the infection in his eyes!

Pride held her too. Love was the pennant atop the marriage-mast. You had stuck it up high in the face of jeers and laughter, swearing it would fly there imperishable forever. Were you going to admit that the poor thing wasn't weathering the marriage-winds as well as you had hoped?

Too bad! Perhaps you expected too much of it!

"I had lunch today with Merrick Keats. He wanted me to go back to him. He made me a marvelous offer."

"He did? That's splendid!"

"I refused it."

"You did! Why?"

"Well," she said hesitantly, "I'm going to have a child."

"You are! I thought you said there was no news!" He sat up in bed and took the bandage off his eyes so he could look at her. A new Jean. Pregnant now. "When did you decide upon that?"

"We didn't."

"Dudley like the idea?"

"Yes—of course."

"Of course!" He patted one of her hands. "And how does the idea appeal to you?"

She didn't reply. Tears that had been threatening for days broke through her lids and trembled on the lashes. A good thing he had put back the bandages.

"Not so much?" he pressed her to reply.

And because he might take the bandages off again and discover her secret, she moved across the room to the window and looked out upon a courtyard of tenements.

Fire-escapes, clothes-lines hung with the family wash. The flags of the fireside. All shapes, all sizes, each tier of pegged-out garments telling its invariable story. Tier upon tier of women, all mothers.

"Come here, dear," his voice came to her from a distance. "That's a serious matter. Bless my soul, it'll make me a grandfather!"

Little by little he drew her secret out of her. Her mouth gave it words; and the words, just as she had known, gave it form, substance. She made light of it, of course, laughing sometimes, and sometimes threading it with falsehood in the need of showing that the lamp of love still shone bright and whole.

It was her fault, naturally. She had made a bargain and she ought to be willing to stick to it. Willing to merge her personality in Dudley's and live according to the vicissitudes and circumstances of his success or failure. Help him where she could, give him comfort, make the hours when he was free from the drudgery of bread-winning as pleasant and cheery as possible. Be cook and housemaid until he could afford to substitute other hired pairs of hands for hers. Give thought to his health: make him eat green vegetables because they were good for him; and if his tummy got out of order plague him into taking a good dose of castor oil.

Yes, the business of wife could be very accurately defined, and it didn't vary very much whether it was conducted in a palace or in one of those tenements across the way. Or at Number 24 Maple Avenue, Laurel Manor.

But it wasn't, he must understand, that she objected to doing menial tasks.

Cooking and all that was fun. Markets were heavenly places with the aroma of coffee and barrels of apples in the fall and bright squares of pink and green and purple berries that appeared all of a summer's morning and then gave way to crates of oranges and bananas that were cut with a special curved knife. And fat

butchers with great white sausages for fingers! Chopping blocks scrubbed with wire brushes, steaks hanging on hooks, and Christmas trees sometimes showing through frost-covered windows!

No, that was fun!

And a sink made white again, its faucets glinting bright, potatoes boiling in a pot, or clean clothes put away in their special drawers, gave you a sense of satisfaction.

But did he know that in the building where they lived there was a row of shops—a restaurant, a drugstore, a tailor's establishment, a laundry, a delicatessen and an upholsterer? And had he ever thought that jointly they did the job of housewife more proficiently than almost any woman in the world?

They stood ready to serve at all hours, to serve pleasantly without ever being headachy and cross. The restaurant offered a variety of foods—anything a man had a taste for. A phone call to the drugstore brought you in a jiffy anything from liniment to cigarettes. The tailor came for your suits and delivered them cleaned and pressed: he would even hang them in your closet if you wanted.

And in that same building, for sixty cents an hour, you could get maid service.

"Dinner at seven. Yes, sir. How many? Was the chicken all right last night? It didn't look so awful good to me!"

"Oh, it was fine, Phoebe, and so was the dessert!"

"Well, I'm glad of that, sir. I always did pride myself on my French cream!"

And if you didn't like Phoebe, there was Jenny and Amy and the old one, Mrs. Who's'is!

Yes, but it didn't make home, you said!

Perhaps not. But what was this "home" that was vested with so much sentiment! A fireside with logs that crackled and blazed; the old people sitting around; youngsters playing with trains and dolls; the young people dancing to the phonograph, or gathered about a bridge-table!

In the country, perhaps, at Christmas, with the Yuletide spirit prevailing and an old-fashioned snowstorm outside. In books where dear old mother knitted and looked across the warm room at her son (the image of his father!) talking in a low voice to the beautiful woman who was his wife! In one's imagination, perhaps. But not in this city of ten million souls and hundreds of thousands of walled-off cubby-holes, nor in the suburbs where logs were thirty-four dollars the cord and where gin was preferable—yes, gin and excitement that only money could buy in town at the shops or at the theaters or at night clubs!

And as for a baby cooing in a bassinet—well, who wanted to dedicate the flower of one's youth to an array of dirty diapers and imbecile noises? Doo-de-doo! Doo-de-doo! A dimple in its chinnie-chin!

"Well," Barry Crome chuckled at her vehemence, "what do you want, my dear? And it seems to me that in your castigation of home you've overlooked a few little things such as love—love and companionship and service."

"I didn't mean to say anything at all."

"I know. But now it's said, we might as well say it all."

Get it out of her system, he seemed to say, and then she'd feel better! She wished that she'd kept it to herself.

"Well, what do you want, my dear?" Kindly spoken; merely an inquiry asking for an honest response. Not like Dudley's impatient: "Well, what *do* you want?"

But kindly spoken or querulously demanded, she didn't know. That is, she couldn't say it in so many words as though it were a vegetable she was choosing: Well, if you don't want turnips, what *do* you want?

Love, companionship, service, he had said.

Was it then that she was just an egocentric person who didn't want to pay for what she had and, when it came right down to it, didn't really know what she wanted? And love, the words breathed out of her in love, were lies.

"I love you, I love you, Dudley. You, only you, I love. I'd do anything, *anything* for you!"

Anything—except to merge her being in his, except to sink her personality in his, except to live his life regardless of her own!

Barry Crome didn't say very much.

Thinking no doubt, Jean reflected, that she was a selfish, carping, grasping creature like most girls nowadays. Pretty face and nothing much back of it. What the hell did she want anyway? Folderols! Good times. Freedom—as though there were such a thing! Give 'em the earth and they'd cry for the moon! If she didn't want a baby why the devil did she let herself get

pregnant; and if she didn't want Dudley why the hell did she marry him? Too damn' full of themselves! Egos sprouting out of them as big as toadstools out of a bed of dung! I, I, I! Me, me, me! Go on home and have your baby! See that it's fat and healthy, and see that those unsuckled breasts get full of milk instead of rancor so that you can give it a proper feeding! What in Christ's name are you but a woman who's done just what you're doing for countless ages, and who'll go on doing it forever, so long as there's a uterus inside of her and a man who wants her enough to lay her on her back and give her brat his name! So go on home!

She got up to say good-by, hating herself for having bared her heart to him, sick at the thought that she had lost his respect.

Troubles were like ugly sores that offended the eye.

"You still haven't enlightened me," he said gently. "You still haven't told me what it is you want." He held one hand, detaining her, and with the other he threw off the bandage so that he might look the answer out of her eyes.

"I want to be brave," she told him.

And because she felt that he still loved her, even if he no longer respected her, she kissed him and replaced the bandage over his eyes.

IV

Two days afterwards he phoned and asked her to come and see him.

She was going anyway to try and laugh away the impression she must have left with him. For no par-

ticular reason she felt happier or at least more reconciled. Perhaps it had done her good to get it out of her system. Now she would show him that it had been just a mood, a fit of the blues. Just as she had said, everybody got a little blue sometimes. It was foolish to attach so much importance to yourself. You couldn't have things the way you wanted them. No one did, and sometimes what you imagined to be the cause of all your troubles turned out in the end to be the very thing you wanted most!

Barry Crome said he was much better. His vision was still tender to the light, and so he was in bed with the black bandage covering his eyes.

"How are you, my dear? What's that you have? You mustn't go spending your pennies on me. How is Dudley?"

"He said he's going to come to see you."

"Tell him to go to the devil! . . . A chicken! And just how I like it! Get another plate and we'll divide it. Give me a little wine. Chianti—and not half bad! In the desk, dear."

He sat up and devoured it, tearing it apart with his hands, sucking the bones. And washing it down with gulps of wine.

Jean watched him, laughing, and thought she understood why Violet Waters, despite her many husbands, stuck to him. He wasn't clever or resourceful; he had never acquired great skill in anything; but somehow he was close to life, and when you were sick of artifice and hypocrisy and manners, you came and watched him eat a chicken; his whole face seemed to eat it, even

his poor swollen eyes ferreting out little titbits that his teeth overlooked.

And the while he munched, he talked in snatches of words to the rhythm of his crunching and quaffing.

He'd been thinking of her. Thinking over what she said. And there was a lot in it. Always believed in people doing as they pleased. So far as they could. Always had himself. Not that he was any criterion to go by. No, by God! Just a dirty old bastard with nothing to show for his years but a couple of sore eyes! You'd never guess from looking at him now that he had had ideals. Ideals and an idea about living. If you asked him what it was now, damned if he could tell you. Maybe it had got lost in the shuffle. Or maybe it had so permeated him that he was it and it was he. More likely though it had oozed out of him and vanished in the fumes of alcohol.

He didn't want to talk about himself though. Just a decaying old bastard!

All he meant to say was that he could understand another person having an idea about living. The idea here—in the heart. Too hazy yet for the dome! Maybe it was a bum idea—like his must have been—but that didn't matter. There was a way of getting life by the tail and riding it, by God, to kingdom come.

"Yes, sir—there is such a thing as winning. Not money and all that. Winning—you understand. There is adventure in it and glory, even though in the end you lose the idea and, looking back, you can't remember quite what it was!

"Anyway, go to it, kid,"—and fumbling among some

papers on a table beside the bed, he gave her the name of a doctor on Riverside Drive and a wad of bills.

"He's about the best there is," he told her, "and knows what he's doing. Better not tell him you're married though. Makes it hard for him. Silly, I know, but that's society for you! Tell him you're a friend of Miss O'Neil. Better write down the name. O'Neil."

She didn't know what to say.

Her heart was suddenly beating with fear, her cheeks burned, even her mind seemed to be trembling with astonishment. She took the money and the envelope and marked down the name.

"Thank you," she said. "Thanks."

She had never considered doing anything like this. Thought of it, yes. Go to some doctor and get rid of it. It was a phrase that came into your head and you pushed out. If you were single it would be different. Then you'd have to do something. But married and healthy and with no obstacle in your path except a personal indisposition, and with Dudley all for it—no, you couldn't seriously consider doing away with it, sneaking around surreptitiously inquiring the name of some doctor.

But she couldn't tell Barry Crome that—not now, after he had gone to all that trouble. It might make him think that *he* had put the idea into her head. And he hadn't. She had railed for an hour the other day against having the baby, hadn't she?—laying most of her unhappiness to it. He had merely taken her at her word. Why was she so astounded then? Hadn't she meant what she said?

"You want to be quite sure before you go to him," he said, half reading her thoughts, "that you don't want it. But don't wait too long."

"No," she murmured, "no, I won't."

She let a decent interval elapse and then went home, leaving him almost as troubled as she was.

Nasty business, he grumbled to himself. Unnatural. But everything nowadays was unnatural. Living thirty stories up in the air. Working eight hours a day. Tearing through the earth in a tunnel. Sitting in a theater staring at shadows dancing upon a screen. Congregating in rich rooms, your neck in a starched vise, bowing and scraping . . . Shaking up poison in silver flasks and getting tipsy.

All because of wheels, whirring and whirring. All because the idea of chaining lightning to wheels—or was it wheels to lightning?—had popped into some lunatic's bean! Or because humanity breeded too fast. Or what have you? Still, try and live naturally—eat, sleep, love, and all that!

Hell! Purely a chemical proposition, a baby; nothing but a fertilized egg. If you wanted to unfertilize it, who should say you nay? Too much damn' sentimentality in the world anyway! To hell with the bugaboos and the Baptists!

Jean went home and hid the money and the envelope in an empty oatmeal box because it was the least likely place that Dudley would stumble across it.

Being married, they shared everything. The desk held their letters and bills; the drawer, the bridge-cards

and cigarettes. A locked box or a drawer evoked curiosity:

"What's in there? Well, why is it locked?"

And two hundred dollars lying around loose:

"What's that for? Where did you get it? Why didn't you tell me?"

Two lives lived as one!

This that she contemplated, the very contemplation of it, was in violation of their vows. It would mean deception and lies.

She lay on her bed, thinking; and quite forgot that she had asked Alan Stover to tea.

She remembered only when she answered the bell and saw him standing outside, smiling and pale from a summer spent in the city. She was in no mood for him, and wished she could send him away. She was held by a sense of power over her own life that that envelope and the money had given her, and she wanted to sift it through the channels of her mind and see where it would lead her. It loomed formidable, frightening. She hadn't realized that when she had taken the money from Crome.

It meant that you weren't a slave to nature any longer. Nature served you. You were set free and, in exchange, you accepted into your charge a huge responsibility. It was manifestly your privilege to bring a life into the world or to deny its existence.

Alan Stover said it depended upon your religious belief—if you had any—and if you had, you'd have to wait till you were dead to find out for sure. For his part, he couldn't see anything divine in procreation. He

preferred to side with the scientists because they did explain in a measure why *he* was messing around the world with his inclination towards men, who, in union, couldn't for the life of them produce a baby.

"Why!" he inquired. "Are you thinking of having a baby?"

"Yes—I was. I am."

He looked at her wan and sickly over the rim of his cup and the smile died in his eyes. There was something about his expression that made her feel very tender towards h[illegible]n for a moment, that made her change the [illegible]

"What's t[illegible]s at Warrs'?"

"Oh, just [illegible]nn' book after another!"

"No, tell me, [illegible]an."

She wanted to know. If she did this thing, and then was able to accept Keats' offer, the gossip of publishers would be of vital concern to her. What they thought would go well next season, biographies or travel books. How So-and-so's novel was doing compared to his previous one.

She saw herself at the desk with a door between Merrie's office and her own. It would be like the old days at home. Getting up in the morning and being catapulted downtown with the anteaters, the buffaloes, the owls, and the gazelles. They could go together, she and Dudley, each with a newspaper neatly folded, devouring the news of the world as a prelude to his daily contribution to it!

V

A neatly garbed maid opened the door and ushered her through a wide hall where stood, to her surprise, an expensive-looking perambulator. She gave her name —"Miss Hurd"—and went in to wait in a spacious and ornately furnished room.

Nervously she sat down, thinking that there was really nothing surprising about the perambulator in the hall. At that moment two children passed down the corridor in company of a nurse who glanced in at her—a hard, reproving expression on her face. (Or did she just imagine that?)

They passed back—the woman looked in again, the children prattling. Another woman passed them—the mother, judging from the talk—and she looked in too.

After an interval, a door opened and a white-clad nurse—one of those thin nerveless creatures with mechanically smiling eyes—came in and led her into the office, into the presence of a short powerfully built man with a fattish face and intelligent Talmudic eyes.

They knew of course why she was there. It seemed ridiculous and cruel to torture her by pretending that they didn't.

"Miss O'Neil sent me," she said after an eternity.

And the nurse vanished.

Miss O'Neil was a magic word. It obviated all unpleasantness. She realized then that he must have ordinary patients too.

He understood perfectly why she was there.

The customary questions. Then into a white room

where she undressed behind a screen, and where presently he came in and examined her—silent, kindly, professional.

She wasn't a criminal come cowering to seek the aid of an accomplice! She hadn't sinned and therefore be made to pay a special price in humiliation. Unlike cases she had heard of and read about—girls who had been insulted and outraged by lewd mouths, coarse jests, and rough hands—she was treated gently, courteously.

One girl, Jenny, she remembered, whom she had met at the Oriental Importing Company where she had worked for a few months before she went to Merrick Keats', had recounted in a sketchy way what had happened to her. As though she were a common prostitute who might as well throw in herself with the fifty dollars! Refusals, laughter, brutality. And such pain as Jenny said she would never forget so long as she lived!

"Put back your clothes and come into the office."

The nurse helped her. Competent hands rested on her arms for a moment and chafed her hands because they were cold.

"There's nothing to be frightened about. He's wonderfully clever."

He gestured her gravely to a seat beside his desk and sat looking at her for a long minute. Was he waiting for her to speak?—talk about money perhaps? Or was he going to tell her something terrifying—she was dangerously, fatally ill?

"Don't you think, Miss Hurd, that you could get this man—whoever he is—to marry you?"

She shook her head quickly.

"No—no, I couldn't—no, marriage is quite—impossible!"

He smiled at her terror. "Why don't you send him to me and let me have a little talk with him?" he suggested. He assured her that he would treat him ceremoniously. "So many young people shy away from marriage because of economic reasons," he said. "Money—and all that—when it's the very thing that might make real men and women out of them. You'd much prefer to be married, wouldn't you?"

"No," she said breathlessly, "no." Her voice trembled with fear, and she racked her bewildered brain for some plausible reason to support her vehement objection. "He—he wouldn't—anyway," she stammered. "There's no use!"

"All right then," he said quietly, his smile reassuring her. "Where do you live?"

Every question he put to her was fraught with danger. If she didn't give the right answer, she'd be lost. He'd find out she was married, and then he'd refuse!

"I have an apartment."

"Do you live alone?"

"No, I share it—with another girl."

That annoyed him for some reason. He frowned and seemed to grow more aloof. Then he took a card from the desk and wrote an address upon it, and told her to come there at eleven o'clock the day after tomorrow —Thursday—and to bring with her whatever she needed for the night—a nightgown and so forth.

"I—I won't be able to go home the same day?" she asked with new alarm.

"No," he told her, "you won't." His grave face informed her that this was a serious matter and he knew what he was about. Don't mistake him for one of those charlatans who aborted girls with septic instruments and didn't give a damn about anything except the money! "We can't afford to take risks, can we?" he said smilingly, and got up to dismiss her. "Thursday then."

She put the card in her bag and took out the money.

"Miss O'Neil said it would be two hundred."

"You can give me it on Thursday."

"I'd rather you took it now."

"Oh, all right." He took the wad, and without counting it, thrust it in his pocket. "Good-by."

"Good-by—and thank you."

All the way home she pondered the unforeseen difficulty of spending a night away from Dudley. She had contemplated it as an hour or two of terrible pain, then going home. This staying away a whole night would have to be prepared for. It was best no doubt, but what plausible lie could she tell Dudley?

Her mother was ill—and had sent for her! He would telephone. How absurd it was to have to account to some one for everything you did, where you went, why you went! Yet, if you didn't, you incurred distrust, aroused suspicion.

In no vital business of your life were you yourself Half a person who had to have the sanction of the other half. Or resort to lies and deception.

It were better perhaps to tell him the truth and suffer his displeasure and anger. He would rail and storm, but if she remained quietly adamant when Thursday came she would go just the same. There was bound to be a serious quarrel anyhow because, regardless of what she told him, the upshot would be the same: she was going back to work for Merrick Keats.

But to tell him now would be dangerous. In his anger, in the heat of disappointment, he might go to any lengths to frustrate her. Evoke the aid of her mother and father. Find out who this doctor was—have her watched and followed, and vent his wrath upon him. He could have him arrested if he chose, have him sent to jail.

No, that was out of the question!

She couldn't place a man who had promised to help her in jeopardy of such wrath.

All evening she tried to think of a single place she could say she was going to spend the night, without spending the night, that would satisfy Dudley and obviate queries or telephone calls. All that evening while they sat at home playing bridge with Ursula and Dave Braddock, all day Wednesday and Wesnesday night at the movies; and when Thursday came and he kissed her good-by at breakfast, she still hadn't solved her ridiculous dilemma.

The best she could do was to use Elinor Stronach because Elinor happened to have no telephone at home, and leave a note for Dudley saying that she had gone to spend the night with her, implying that Elinor was in some kind of trouble. And if he asked why she

hadn't called him at the office to tell him, she would have to lie and say that it just hadn't occurred to her.

On the way to the clinic in the taxi, she realized that in her concern about Dudley she had scarcely thought about the thing itself. Perhaps it was as well.

It would be frightfully painful. Not as bad, perhaps, as childbirth; but nowadays they made childbirth tolerable, and even if they didn't, you were rewarded for all your suffering. You were bringing a life into the world, bringing a son to your man, bringing a pair of hands and a pair of eyes to your country.

This was the opposite of all that: depriving your man, depriving your country. From that point of view it was a terrible thing, a really terrible thing. And solely to benefit yourself.

How alone it made her feel, journeying to this unknown place upon this secret mission! Only the doctor knew. And Barry Crome. What if something went wrong and she died! Would they spirit her body away, dispose of it somehow with never a word to anybody? She visioned those intelligent eyes of the doctor as malevolent eyes, himself with his stocky body and his strong thick arms as a monster out of hell whose pleasure was to torture girls who had scorned the blessings of God. Go forth and multiply that the earth might be peopled!

The cab drew up. Her bag in hand, she hurried up the brown stone steps and was admitted into a clean dark atmosphere permeated with the odor of anesthetics.

They were expecting her. Ah, yes, Miss Hurd. A

voice told her to go right on upstairs—two flights, room number seventeen.

A nurse met her on the landing. Ah, yes, Miss Hurd. She led the way into a room—bare, white, sanitary, with a window open to the branches of a tree already leafless in September.

The doctor would be there soon. Eleven, he had said? Well, sometimes he was a little late. In the meantime, she could do as she pleased. Better undress and get ready. The bell was there on a cord by the bed. If she wanted anything, she could ring.

She was sorry to see the woman hurry out. Unlike the friendly nurse in the doctor's office, this one was oldish and brusque of manner. Disapproving. That was to be expected, no doubt. She might have been willing to answer a few questions, however, and it would help to know how long it took, how other girls stood the pain.

She did as she was told; undressed, put on her nightgown.

A long time went by.

Occasionally she heard footsteps outside; she listened, her heart quickening. She wished now that she had brought a book to read. How foolish not to have thought of it when she knew she was going to stay the night. She found courage at last to ring the bell, and after a while the nurse came in.

"Want something?"

"I was wondering if you had a book I could read."

"I'll see,"—and she was out.

She returned with the doctor.

"Well, how are we this morning?" he asked cheerily.

"Scared."

"I suppose you are!" He smiled and turned to the nurse. "Take her along up, Miss Green."

Up to a small operating-room fitted with a white coffin-like table, trays covered with towels, cylindrical gas-tanks, and a host of saviors of pain that were terrifying to behold.

She wondered if she could have some water to drink, and was told that she had better not drink water now.

Dudley was at his office, or out to lunch. What if he knew she was here in this room, her throat parched, her heart pounding! She wished the doctor would hurry and come.

The door opened and a little man with a pale and not very intelligent face came in. He nodded without smiling and told her to get up on the table. Was he going to do it then—and not her doctor? Had her doctor just arranged it then? She didn't like this man. He wouldn't care how much he hurt her.

What a fool she had been to come here at all! But she could run away even now! Run out, down to her room, down to the hall and out. If they tried to hold her, she'd fight. She would tell them that they could keep the money!

She lay there terrified while the little man felt her pulse and applied a stethoscope to her heart, his gnome's head peering out from his surgeon's white like a medieval sorcerer.

Then her doctor came in, and instantly the atmosphere of the room changed. A radiance illumined everything; the horrors were dispersed.

"Just do as we tell you," he said gently, "and don't be frightened."

Miss Green took her hands and held them. A hard smothering object was pressed over the lower part of her face. She heard a voice telling her to keep her mouth closed and to breathe in deeply.

An anesthetic of some kind. Then she wouldn't feel anything! Just this—this buzzing in her ears, louder and louder, and her heart filling with something that was blowing it up like a balloon, suffocating her. Another breath, another breath, another—

Suddenly Dudley was in their apartment and was reading the note on the desk. He shouldn't be there at that time. But evidently it was Saturday. She had made the ghastly mistake of thinking it was Thursday. He read the note. And he knew everything. Beside himself with anger, he dashed out of the apartment and in through another door to the doctor's office where she was sitting. "Yes," the doctor was saying, "everything will be all right." But when Dudley rushed in, the doctor was terrified. He knew that Dudley was her husband; he knew what Dudley had in mind. "Don't, Dudley, don't!" She managed to get between Dudley and the doctor. Dudley fought to throw her aside and get at the man to kill him. A knife glinted in his hand, and her hold on him was breaking. "Hurry, hurry! I can't hold on! I can't!" A door slammed as the doctor managed to

escape, and she was alone with Dudley, an infuriated Dudley with bloodied eyes and a madness to kill her now. Nearer and nearer the knife came against her ebbing strength. "No, Dudley, no!" It fell pricking into her bosom, plunging down into her entrails, deeper, deeper, until the agony was excruciating. Her ears buzzed horribly, her heart was bursting, because she was dying and this was the terrible metamorphosis between life and death.

But no—that couldn't be!

The ghostly forms were scurrying away into nothingness. A huge light, familiar somehow, was burning down into her eyes through a confusion of red spots like blood that traveled away from her vision at an alarming speed and from a great distance brought back voices that crashed against her eardrums. And through this metamorphosis of death into life there was the hideous pain of that knife tearing like fire into her womb.

The red spots came towards her now, whirring back into her eyes. Gyves about her wrists and ankles held her fast so that she was helpless against the torture.

Horrifying fear mingled with it and came up through the pain to freeze her heart.

Then a shock of some kind, a jarring. Then nothing —a sort of lapse. And then everything.

Swiftly everything became allocated—ordered, sane, comprehensible. The other—even the pain—was just a dream. She had felt nothing.

That's what they must be telling her—Miss Green and the doctor and the little man. Something must have

amused them because they were smiling at her, something she must have said under the anesthetic.

"Am I all right now? Can I get up?"

"You're all right. I wouldn't get up just yet if I were you. They'll take you downstairs in a minute."

The memory of the pain still lingered.

Was it pain, or was it a dreamed-of pain? Surely it couldn't have been real pain because it was gone now.

She blotted away a troublesome image of Dudley.

VI

With dusk came an oppressive sadness. It seemed that she regretted acutely what she had done, despite her reason that assured her otherwise. But the mind was one thing and the wellspring of an acute feeling quite another. It was so wrong, so grotesque.

It belonged to that terrible room upstairs with its bits of enameled iron, its bits of polished steel, its painted whiteness and its manufactured odors. They in coördination were a marshaled and mechanized incubus that reared a contemptuous metal mask above nature in general, above humanity in particular.

Born out of greed and nurtured on the milk of crazy ingenuity, it was a hating thing sworn to combat and to a strange supremacy it gained through destruction. It selected first and then destroyed in order to exist.

It dwelt in you too, this monster, inextricably interwoven and yet at war with that other self that had emerged out of and still was rooted to the lands and rivers and forests and furry animals, so that you too selected first and then destroyed in order to exist. Per-

haps that was how it had always been. Perhaps it was good. Perhaps the ladder to heaven was up the rungs of Economics, and the monster was really God.

All done, all dedicated to the same end. No matter how far you looked, or what else you chose to call it, the objective was invariably the quest of personal happiness.

To live better!

Once in a pretty room watching the moon from a window, she had thought those words, with Dudley asleep and her body young to love.

The ghost of that night floated in upon her now, touching her with the shadowy fingers of memory. She couldn't feel what she had felt then, of course; she could only remember what she must have felt. Happiness, ecstasy, love of course. She had crept back into bed beside her beloved and had nestled close to him; she had touched him with her hands because he was so far from her in sleep.

What need she had of him then! Now in these last many months it had almost gone.

The night promised to be lonely and sleepless. Miss Green came in to make her comfortable, and stayed for a long time telling about the gossip of the clinic.

It was by no means given over to malpractice. On the contrary, many women came there to have babies. There was a woman upstairs now who had been waiting for four days. It was her first, Miss Green said, and the poor creature was scared to death. The bigger they were the more fuss they made! Little nervous women who suffered the most were the best patients.

But Miss Green was sorry for them all, poor souls! They said it was worth it, but she didn't know. She used to think she'd like to get married and have children, but that was before she took up nursing. A nurse saw too much! Funny how they came, these women, and got so friendly that they'd tell you everything about themselves and their husbands and all, and then they went away after a couple of weeks and you never saw them again!

Life was an entirely practical matter that only nurses and doctors were privileged to understand! They brought it into the world, cut it up from time to time, and knew precisely why it finally expired! People might think themselves people, but they were really nothing but medical cases! In the end some doctor or nurse patched you up or cut you open to find out just why the machinery had run down!

Jean awoke in the morning to a great urgency of being out of the place, but it was not until past noon that the doctor came, and Miss Green wouldn't hear of her getting up until he had seen her.

He told her to go home and to stay in bed for two days and, if she had any trouble, to get in touch with him at once.

"Thank you," she said. "I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am."

He brushed her thanks away and bade her good-by. Then he frowned down at her.

"You ought to arrange your affairs," he suggested gravely, "so that you could have some children. It's too

bad to let little things stand in the way. There's nothing like them—and it'd do you a lot of good."

He must know then that she was married!

"I do—I do want children—some day," she replied.

"This isn't a very good start, is it?" He shook his head, smiling a little. "No, little lady, you've got to want them—really!"

She got up and dressed, feeling weak and dizzy. She fought against it and hurried. What if Dudley, not hearing from her in the morning, had phoned Elinor Stronach at the office! It would have been wiser perhaps to have taken Elinor into her confidence. Was it shame that had stopped her—or vanity? Afraid of dropping in Elinor's esteem!

She hastened into the house and up to the apartment. Her hand trembled as she inserted the key in the lock and pushed open the door. Then relief at the sight of the dirty dishes on the table, the remains of Dudley's breakfast. Her note, opened and read, lay on the desk. She sat down on the couch a little faint from excitement.

Phoning downstairs for a maid to come and clean up, she got undressed and into bed. Better do as the doctor said. She really felt quite ill. And how badly she looked! The mirror gave back a reflection of sick eyes deeply circled, of a tired face drained of its blood.

The afternoon hours dragged by unpleasantly. For a spell she dozed off into a troubled fevered sleep. When she woke up she lay there wondering if she were all right. Surely if she were really ill, she would have pain.

She kept watching the clock, wishing the time would go and yet dreading to hear the sound of Dudley's approach.

At last he came. He opened the door and came into the darkening living-room.

"Jean!"

"Here I am. In here."

He strode in, switching on the lights.

"What's the matter? Ill?"

"It's—it's nothing. Just a headache."

"What was the trouble with Elinor?" he inquired, moving to the bed, and stooping to kiss her. "You're ill. You're as white as a sheet."

"It's nothing—Dudley. Where are you going?"

"I'll call Doctor Newton."

"No, don't—don't, Dudley!"

"Don't be foolish, Jean! You're ill." She heard him in the living-room; thumping down the telephone directory on the table, paging the leaves.

"Dudley," she called shrilly, "come here!"

She waited a moment, and then ran into the other room and snatched the phone from his hand as he spoke the number into the transmitter. She replaced the receiver on the hook and put the phone back in its accustomed place.

"I've been to a doctor,"—trying to keep up her voice. "I've had an abortion."

"What!"

She hurried back to the bedroom and got into bed again. A few seconds went by. She was grateful for them. She closed her eyes in an effort to regain her

composure. When she opened them, Dudley was standing on the threshold of the door; and the room had righted itself, the walls had stopped swaying out and in. One corner of Dudley's mouth was pulled down; it twitched a little from nervousness.

"You had it done—today?"

"No—yesterday."

"Oh!"

"A very good man—very competent."

"Competent!" The word came forth in a shout as though he could not control his voice. "Who told you he was competent? Who sent you to him?"

"I found out—from some one."

"Who? Elinor?"

"No."

"Where did you get the money?"

She closed her eyes in entreaty.

"Did you hear what I said?" he demanded, not moving from the door. "Where did you get the money?"

"I got it—from a friend of mine."

"What friend?"

"Oh, Dudley—please—!"

"I want to know."

"I can't tell you, Dudley."

"You will tell me!" he bellowed at her.

"I won't. I won't tell you anything." She sat up and, suddenly angry, glared back at him. "It's none of your business. I didn't want the baby and now I'm not going to have it. I found the doctor, got the money and went and had it done. It was my affair—and I attended to it—and I'm not going to incriminate a lot of people by

telling you who the doctor was or who gave me the money or—anything."

"But you could have told me, at least! Good God!"

"I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because—"

"Because it was none of my business!" he cut in sarcastically. "But it was my child, wasn't it! And you—you're my wife!"

His mouth commenced to tremble, and he turned quickly away from the door.

"Dudley!"

He didn't reply. She didn't expect him to. His words tingled through her like the bite of a lash, turning her into an aching penitent.

His suddenly changed expression from anger to sadness remained in the space he had vacated, and he himself kept looking at her with tears back of his boy's eyes, his mouth twisted and trembling with bitterness and disappointment.

Because what he had hoped for wouldn't be! Because she wasn't like Dot.

Did it mean so much to him—more than she could understand? Was it a primordial thing that lay at the root of a man's love for a woman? What was he thinking, sitting there on the couch in the other room, silent, sad? Condemning her, damning her in his heart, trying to hate her!

"Dudley!"

"What is it?"

"Dudley—come here."

He didn't come.

Her heart reached out to him and she loved him terribly, not as a man so much but as a boy. The love she felt sometimes after he had taken her and was tired as a child is tired. She wished that he would come to her so that she might take his head in her arms and press it to her breast, hiding her own sorry face in his hair. She would tell him everything, explain everything; and he would understand. If he would be patient with her, later on she would give him a child. She wanted one too. Of course she did! Tenderness would span the differences of months; misunderstandings would be washed away.

"Dudley!" she called again.

"What is it?" He came and stood in the doorway, looking at her with hard sad eyes.

"Why don't you go and get some dinner? It's past eight."

"I don't want any dinner."

"Please—Dudley."

"I'll get you something—if you like."

"Some milk—and a sandwich."

"What kind?"

"Chicken. And please eat something yourself, Dudley."

He went out; came back and served her with the same hard look in his eyes, his cheeks pinched, his mouth tight with bitterness.

"Did you have something to eat, Dudley?"

"Yes."

"What did you have?"

He shrugged his shoulders. What difference did it make to her what he had to eat—or whether he had eaten at all! Her solicitude infuriated him, and quick angry words sprang to his mouth:

"I don't mean a damn' thing to you any more. I don't count. You want to do just as you please—regardless of me—regardless of any one. All right—but why don't you come out with it then instead of shamming and lying and pretending! If you didn't want the kid, why didn't you say so? If you wanted to get rid of it, why didn't you tell me? What do you think I am—a damn' fool, a dummy? Suppose something had happened to you! I heard of a girl once who went to one of those guys and he raped her. You wouldn't care, I suppose. Just so you can have your way! Do as you please!" Derision, irony made his voice shrill. "Live your own life!"

She hesitated to speak. He was too angry to be reasonable, and it was so futile to quarrel.

"Why not admit it?" he went on harshly. "Why not come out with it and say I don't count!"

"It isn't that," she said slowly.

"No?"

"No—and there's no use trying to tell you—no use trying to go on at all—unless we understand each other. We're not one person, Dudley, even though we are married. We're two people. Two different people."

"*Different!* You bet we are!" She was different, different from other girls, different from his idea of what other girls should be.

"I ought to have told you about the baby," she said

gently. "I ought to have told you why I haven't been happy—oh, not just the last few weeks, but for months. I ought to have told you that the other day I saw Merrick Keats, and he made me an offer to go back to work for him—"

"Oh—so that's why you did it!"

"Please, Dudley—listen. I ought to have told you everything. I've tried to. But it always ends by your getting angry and saying—'Well, what *do* you want!'—as though I haven't any right to do anything or think anything or feel anything that you don't feel. I've tried to be what you want me to be. Maybe that's why I didn't know myself what I wanted. But now I do know. I want to live my own life—*my* life," she emphasized, "and not yours."

"Oh, I see!"

"That's why I say we're two people—and not one. We shouldn't try to be one."

"Oh, I see!" he said again. "You're going to live your own life—and I can go to the devil!"

She laughed because she wanted to cry, because it was so futile to attempt to make him understand. He didn't want to understand.

But she told him nevertheless, and he listened, breaking in now and then to say:

"Oh, I see!"—neither agreeing, nor objecting, nor differing with her.

"Oh, I see!" (Live her own life! Work for Keats, who was in love with her probably. Wanted her back so he could have her round the office, the dirty bastard!)

"That kind of work interests me," she pressed on, ex-

plaining, "writers—books, plays and all that." She would be self-supporting as she used to be, and she would contribute her share towards the maintenance of their apartment. That would mean that they would be comparatively well-off instead of being poor. He would have almost half what he earned now to spend as he pleased—on pleasure, or he could put it away. And she would have money for clothes and theaters and books. Her money. She wouldn't have to come and ask him for everything.

"Oh, I see!" (Her money—and his! Why not keep a set of books and have a firm of chartered accountants come in once a month to balance their accounts! Send out statements showing what he owed her or she owed him! Money! That was at the bottom of it. He didn't make enough for her! Clothes and theater tickets at ten and twelve and twenty dollars from speculators!)

"And there's no reason, Dudley, why we *should* like the same people. No reason why we must have the same friends." Now and again they would come across some one whom they both liked, and that would be wonderful, but they shouldn't expect it.

(Jude Taylor and that bunch of perverts and drunkards! She'd run around with them whenever she pleased, and wherever she pleased, and he could have Dot and Geof and the Pilgrims whom she despised because they weren't amusing. Amusing! What she meant was vicious! A lot of whores and pimps and degenerates! Hadn't he been to their parties? Hadn't he lived with Alan Stover who was nothing but a damned fairy? And occasionally they'd spend an eve-

ning together when neither had a previous engagement! Why not separate apartments and call up one another to make a date to sleep together? "Well, how about next Tuesday then?" "I'd love to, Dudley, but Nina Warr is giving a party and I simply must go. Call me early next week!")

"I see!" (They would be lovers, sleeping partners. That was all the use she had for him. Otherwise she was to be wholly free, to come and do and go as she liked. With no questions asked or answered. Information purely voluntary. Private lives! Married lovers! Otherwise each on his own!)

"And that's your idea of being a wife!" he exclaimed. It made him laugh.

"I don't know what being a wife is," she replied.

"You're damn' right you don't!"

"It's a sort of combined servant and companion and mistress, I suppose," she went on, "that comes to a man in a jellied state and is pressed into his particular mold. If I were a man and that's what I wanted, Dudley, I'd pick out a nice dumb girl who liked to be inferior to myself. I'd tell her what to think, and she'd think it. That's what wives used to be—nice dumb creatures who paid for their keep in servitude. In the olden days a man had lots of wives, just as he had lots of cows and things. He bought them. But if I can earn my own living, I don't see why I should have to accept anything from you—just because we're lovers—and happened to get married."

"Oh, you don't! And I don't suppose you see why we got married?" he inquired frankly.

"No, I don't—altogether."

He laughed again and got up. "Well, at least you have made your position clear. At least we know where we stand!"

"Everything will be exactly the same—except that we will both be a good deal happier."

"Think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Well, you're wrong," he turned on her suddenly, his face dark and twisted with anger. "What it means is that you and I are washed up. And you could have saved yourself a hell of a lot of talk if you had told me straight out that you don't love me any more."

He stood staring at her, his blazing eyes challenging her to deny it.

But when she did, he laughed at her and went into the kitchen to get his brown bag from the top of the dish-closet.

He came back into the bedroom and packed it, while she looked on, frightened and unhappy.

She didn't believe that he would really go. He would stop suddenly and break into a storm of words. Then there would be a reconciliation.

Or had he made up his mind to force her to give in? If she didn't, he would go. If she didn't take back everything she had said, he would go out of her life and leave it empty of love as it had been before. If she loved him, she would give in. That's how he was thinking.

Well, by the same token, why didn't he give in? Why should she be the one?

"Dudley, you're being very foolish—and unreasonable."

"Think so?"

He closed the bag and pulled savagely at the straps, snatched it from the chair and rushed out.

VII

The door slammed and the apartment was filled with the emptiness of loss. Almost a ghostly presence, it wandered about, across the walls, back and forth and into corners, with the uneasy quiet of a troubled spirit. It was almost visible in the closet divested of his clothes and the bathroom-shelf bare of his shaving things.

And so it would remain until he came back with his bag and emptied it again, and returned it to the top of the dish-closet.

Jean knew that then; but she knew that he would be back tomorrow or the next day—when his anger subsided and he had thought things over.

It was only that ghostly quiet that kept her awake and provoked her into crying the pent-up tears of nervousness and fatigue. Then she was angry with him for being so stubborn and selfish. She was glad he was gone! When he came back she would tell him to go away again—and forever! Go and find some little numbskull like Dot Aldrich who would follow him through life like a sheep and bear him lambs, as many as he chose, in a suburban fold, and always do exactly as he pleased because he was a man and she was just his wife!

But when her tears ceased and she lay sleepless in the dark, with that strange quietness hovering about in the room, and in the other room and in the kitchen beyond, she remembered that in a day she had been shorn of the fruit of her womanhood.

Her man and his child. In a day. And of her own doing. She would go to work again for Keats.

And then she would be back where she had started from.

She had gained nothing, and had lost love.

Surely it were better to have love and be unhappy than to lose love and be unhappy!

She listened—thinking she heard a sound at the door.

Often the following day she listened—thinking she heard him outside; the scratch of his key on the lock, his hand on the doorknob. And each time her heart exulted; and each time it fell back into that strangely troubled void.

She went to see Merrick Keats and told him that she was ready to work for him if his proposition was still open to her, if he hadn't concluded arrangements with Mr. Goodleaf.

He hadn't, for the excellent reason that Mr. Goodleaf had existed only in his imagination. And he was more than delighted that Jean had come to her senses.

"I thought you would," he said. "I thought I would hear from you. Something told me so. Although I've had a devil of a time putting off Goodleaf. But I'm glad. I'm very glad. We'll draw up a proper agreement so you can hold me to account for every penny that's

coming to you—and I hope it'll be thousands—thousands."

He was a little beside himself with happiness. He held her hands and jerked out smiles between his phrases, his brown eyes glinting gold through the murkiness.

"There's no one I'd rather have with me. No one, I assure you. I'm genuinely fond of you, Jean. I'd like to see you succeed. It would give me pleasure—great pleasure."

He wanted to kiss her hands—charmingly, gallantly, like a Frenchman could; but he wasn't a Frenchman and so he didn't.

He released them and grew a little breathless; and stammering, he suggested that they go and have a look at the offices again. He had signed the lease, and now they could decide about the partitions.

On the way back, they stopped at a furniture emporium where Jean selected her desk. Merrie insisted that she must have all new furniture in her office, and she could choose anything—anything within reason of course.

They weren't millionaires yet! But something good-looking. No use being penny-wise and pound-foolish! A few dollars more down and a few more dollars a month. Wonderful, this American installment scheme! In England it was different. Sounder perhaps. Better in the long run. But they didn't go in for show over there. Here you had to. I'll-tell-the-world! Yea bo! Success! Success by installments! Your credit is good! Get your share! Ha! ha!

It should have been great fun, with Merrie so ridiculously hilarious. It was the beginning of a career, the embarking upon a fine venture, and it should be entered into with enthusiasm and zest, with hopes as sparkling as champagne bubbles.

But the best Jean could do was to simulate enthusiasm while that perpetual refrain pounded in her ears:

You've got what you want!

A desk and an office and old Merrick Keats! Mahogany or oak, glossy or dull finish, solid or veneer!

"I'll decide tomorrow. I'd like to think it over."

"All right, there's no hurry. We've got until the fifteenth."

The apartment greeted her with hollow emptiness. Phantom fingers reached out from the walls and corners and clutched at her heart. A phantom voice laughed at her derisively. It beat her so fiercely of a sudden that she was driven to hoist the flag of surrender, and when the hands of the clock converged towards five-thirty, she picked up the telephone and called Dudley at the office. Just to say "hello." Ask where he was living.

"Hello."

"Hello."

"Dudley, it's—"

The sharp click of the disconnection.

That roused anger in her, and the anger, restoring her morale, guarded her through the lonely evening.

In the morning she selected her desk and the chair that went with it. She chose a rug for the few square feet of concrete floor, and ordered low bookcases built,

above which she would hang sketches and cartoons of celebrities that from time to time she would acquire.

And the die was cast. Dudley or no Dudley, nothing would induce her to back out now. A measure of strength bolstered up her courage and made her believe that this was what she wanted, and that the loneliness would pass.

Each morning the sense of loss would be less poignant; and every evening, returning from the office laden with manuscripts against a sleepless night, the emptiness would be a little less hollow. In time she would get used to it. In time even the pain would cease.

But before even a week had gone by, Dudley came back.

She was lying on the couch, away in dreams from the manuscript she had been reading. Suspended in a static sadness in which flashes of people passed and repassed—Merrie, Elinor, her mother. She had neglected her lately. Poor old soul, all alone up there with him.

Suddenly the door opened, and Dudley came in. He stood in the doorway, one shoulder pulled down by the weight of his bag. He set it down on the threshold, and looked at her, taking in the manuscripts that lay on the floor, on the couch.

"Dudley!" She sprang up, ran to him.

He took her in his arms and they stood so—close, holding each other tight. When he released her, he gave a little laugh.

And neither of them knew what to say.

He had brought his bag, and that meant that he had come back to stay; and yet the wrong word might drive

him out again. She mustn't let him feel that she had won; somehow she must wipe away the sense of defeat. His eyes kept falling to the manuscripts, and his heart must be full of rancor. How bitter it must be for a man to love a woman in spite of himself! How he must hate himself for loving her!

Sudden compassion filled her whole being and made her achingly happy. Because she was supreme she wanted to prostrate herself; and she sank down on her knees in front of him.

"I missed you awfully. I don't know how I've stood it. Oh, Dudley! Dudley, darling!"

"I *couldn't* stand it," he murmured, his voice quivering.

Their faces close pressed, with arms entwined, their tears mingled.

But this force—love if you will—that had impelled him back to her was not of the substance it purported to be.

His week away from her had been an arid stretch of loneliness. The only sociable evening had been spent with Adela Geist, a stenographer in the office, who bore a slight resemblance to Jean. He took her to dinner and to the movies with the defensive idea of becoming interested in her. But she failed him miserably, succeeding only in making him doubly aware of his own inferiority. This served to arouse jealousy in him.

What was Jean doing this night that he was spending in the company of this girl? She had only to crook her little finger to bring a dozen worshipers to her feet, and where might he hope to find beauty and intelli-

gence and spirit to replace hers? He might search the whole world, he might grow old searching, while in the meantime some one else would be enjoying her.

Why should he let her go—he to whom she was bonded, he who had an inalienable right to her—and search the world over for her equal!

Hungry nights. Coming home to an empty room at six. Evenings with Adela Geist or some other disappointment. Why should he?

Only a fool relinquished his right to a property because it chanced to have an objectionable feature or two! Surely you could still derive what benefits it possessed! And dwelling in comfort was surely better than going out beggared into a wilderness with the awful certainty that some one else would come along to poach, to trespass, to become finally the occupant and owner of the domain you had vacated.

Then fear crept in—a huge, racking fear. Already there might be some one poaching, trespassing!

So, when she ran to him and kissed away his fear, the tears came—and then a torrent of words about love. True words they were; true, if love were shackles and vanquishment and possession; false only if love were selfless and fair.

But out of the compounded essences of his weaknesses, the words came soft and endearing:

She could have no idea how unhappy he had been. She was everything to him—everything. He simply had to come back tonight. He had been so frightened that he would find her out. When he looked up at the window and saw the light, he knew that this was his home.

With her. No matter where it was, she was his home.

"Dudley! Dudley!" she kept murmuring, her heart melting.

And they were lovers again.

The yielding to his greedy need of her suffused her with a sublime consciousness of her own power to be. It was as love should always be. Strong and eternal it existed apart from the small selfish separate life each lived, the little life that tried at times to transcend this other. But it couldn't. This was their savior, this their refuge.

He too felt this.

His mastery of her restored him his manhood. This, this passionate supremacy over her, this crushing act of bodily vanquishment, restored her to him utterly and made her his against all the world.

Jealousy, rancor, antipathy found vent in his passion, and became lost and welded into what he knew for love.

Let her think as she pleased! Let her run back and forth to an office, and make a little money to spend on hats and dresses! Let her spend her days gabbing to a lot of scribbling maniacs! In the evening she would come through *his* door and into *his* lair. At night his hands would uncover her and, loving her, he would crush her with the weight of his body.

And against all the world she would love him. Love him like this. Her eyes two wet stars. Looking up at him, *looking up at him;* her body bent to his will.

Spent, satisfied, his wife restored to him and the storm of those unhappy days over, he decided that per-

haps there was a good deal in her idea of economic emancipation that he wouldn't really object to when it came right down to it.

She said she wanted to support herself and share the expense of the apartment. That meant that she would buy her own clothes, provide herself with pocket money. The same arrangement, in fact, as he had had with Alan Stover; and now he was earning more than he had then.

Maybe he ought not to let her share their living expenses. He would insist that the apartment was entirely his affair. On the other hand, as long as she was doing it against his will, why should he make it easy for her! Let her pay her share of everything and see how much she liked it!

It might bring her to her senses quicker than anything. The laugh would be on her then. A year, two at the most, and she would be only too glad to do like other married girls—have a kid and all that! And then it would be his turn to say what was what! Where they would live and how.

In the meantime she could be as economically emancipated as she damned well pleased.

Funny though. Living with her and not even supporting her! Anything that he bought her would be a sort of present. Like it was before they were married. She would be grateful and surprised.

And with the money he could save, he could take an occasional flyer in the market. A few hundreds sometimes could be doubled and tripled in a week or two. That's the way people got rich. With money. Nobody

ever got rich by saving, especially nowadays with everything so expensive.

There were Geof and Dot staying in every night, foregoing even the movies so that they would have enough by March for the hospital and the doctor. Pretty tough when you came to think of it!

No, all things considered, he was glad he wasn't in Geof's shoes.

In the spring, if he saved, he could have a car. He would have a roadster. A long snappy-looking model. He knew just the one. He would doll it up a bit with one of those powerful spots and a trick horn so that when he pulled up outside Geof's place, they'd know it was he.

That would be fun—going out to their little place in Laurel Manor and taking them for a spin. Fun too buzzing round town. Then they'd know about it down at the office. Wouldn't do him any harm to have them know that he had some dough.

He saw himself getting into the car, polished and glinting like jewels. He heard the cushioned slam of the door and the quiet meshing of the gears. Under his skilled guidance it rolled into the stream of Fifth Avenue traffic. The green light was on and he could go. Now the red light. Now green again. Stop and go, jockeying for space.

What fun it was!

On and on, out into the country, he drove himself to sleep.

It was spring again; almost summer now.

Dudley waited an interminable hour until almost seven o'clock and then told Eva to serve dinner.

His car was little more than a week old and he was in love with it. He could hardly wait for the day to pass. His hands itched to get hold of the wheel and to feel the rhythmic purr of the thing beneath him.

Just as he sat down Jean came in with the brisk business air which she had adopted and with the invariable bundle of manuscripts under her arm.

"I'm not late, am I? It's only just seven."

"It's five past," Dudley grumbled. "I don't see why you can't get home on time. I have to come all the way

from Wall Street while you only have to come a few blocks."

"I stayed talking to Elinor. She told me the strangest thing about Merrie."

"Come on and sit down," he interrupted. "I want to get out."

She tidied herself hurriedly and sat down opposite him.

Impervious to his irritation she told him about Elinor's discovery.

"Merrie's started to drink. He was quite tight in the office this afternoon."

"Well, what of it?"

"He never used to touch a thing, Dudley. Elinor said she stayed down late the other evening to finish up some work. She thought he had gone home. She went into his office for something or other and found him slouched down in his chair asleep. It scared her to death. She thought something had happened to him. It is strange, isn't it? Because he hasn't half as much to worry about as he used to have. And he seems much happier."

"What difference does it make?"

"I just wish he didn't." But it was plain that Dudley wasn't interested, so she dropped the subject. "How did things go with you?"

"Same as usual. I wish you'd tell Eva to hurry. I told Geof we'd drive out tonight."

"Oh, but we can't, Dudley. We're going to Olive O'Doone's. Don't you remember? I told you about it a week ago."

"Well, I'm not going. I hate that gang anyway."

"But I promised, Dudley. And you said you'd go."

"Well, I'm not going and that's all there is to it. You go if you want to and I'll go to Geof's."

"All right," she acceded regretfully, not knowing whether she was glad or sorry.

She did have a better time with those people when Dudley wasn't there. They disliked him almost as much as he abhorred them. And that made things uncomfortable. But she much preferred him to come because it assuaged the more uncomfortable feeling that they were drifting apart. And that troubled her.

It was a subtle drifting apart but perceptible nevertheless; she realized it even if Dudley didn't, but somehow she wasn't doing anything to stem the tide of their drifting. Once or twice, in fact, in the last month or two she had caught herself actually wondering if it wouldn't have been better had Dudley not come back. That was absurd of course.

He called up Geof and told him that Jean wasn't coming, so that he could get a fourth for bridge. He half hoped Geof would get Kitty Frazer. Then gulping down his coffee he hurried over to the garage.

With a glowing feeling of opulence he strode in through a crowd of urchins to the acrid-smelling building. A couple of chauffeurs looked at him enviously, the boss addressed him as "sir," and the negro in rubber boots enquired obsequiously if he wanted his car washed when he came back.

All this because he was a car-owner now. His mail

in the morning brought him letters addressed that way: "Dear Mr. Car-Owner—"

Out through the crowd of urchins that stopped their play to look at his shiny monster, he drove to a speakeasy for a bottle of gin and had his flask refilled with whiskey. Then into that glittering stream of Fifth Avenue traffic, through the Park, and swiftly through the soft May night to Laurel Manor.

Outside the little house he heralded his arrival with a long toot of his special horn.

They all came out to greet him, Dot and Geof and Kitty Frazer. He got out, slamming the cushioned door, feeling their eyes on his car and admiring him because of it.

"How's it going, Dud?" Geof enquired.

"Great. It's a pleasure to drive it. Marvelous pick-up. Fast acceleration and snappy brakes. That's what you need in a car. Came out through the traffic in forty-five minutes."

"And that's going, I'll say!"

"Come on in," Dot said. "Too bad Jean couldn't come."

"She had to go to one of those literary parties," he explained. "Olive O'Doone," he turned to Kitty, impressing her with the name. "The woman who wrote 'Enchantment.' "

"Yes," Kitty said appreciatively, "I've read it. Is she anything like that?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, you know!"

"Well, in a way she is," Dudley admitted, escorting her up the steps of the porch. "She's what you call a nymph—and makes no bones about it. She got tight the other night and wanted to bet me that she'd had more experience with men than any man in the room had had with women. Can you beat that?"

"What was she trying to do," Geof demanded, "have a little experience with you?"

"Maybe," Dudley laughed back, "but I wasn't with her alone!"

Everything was ready for bridge, the cards laid out, ashtrays, and the bridge-lamp pulled out and shining down on the linen square that was tied with tapes around the table-legs.

Dudley enquired about little Dorothy who would be three months old on Saturday, and the game commenced. Dudley and Kitty against the Aldriches for a tenth. Geof and Dot played cautiously and hoped they would win. Dudley was inclined to overbid a little; he felt he could afford to take chances.

At ten o'clock they stopped for Dot to nurse the baby. After twenty minutes she called to them and they came into the nursery to see little Dorothy, clean, bright-eyed and solemn. Geof took her from Dot and made funny faces to make her smile. He frightened her into crying, and then Dot took her from him and comforted her with special words that had no real sense.

Kitty looked at Dudley with soft eyes; and they all watched Dot, glorified somehow, as she bent over the crib.

Then they all filed out and went back to the living-room under the spell of a mysterious warmth and well-being.

Dudley put an arm on Geof's shoulder and said:

"Cute as all hell, Geof!"

"Nothing like it, Dud. I'll say that!" He wasn't quite the same Geof, though, who used to keep up an incessant stream of wisecracks. A little worn-looking. Or maybe it was that he was drinking too much.

Dot came in, serious and content. Her figure was voluptuous now. One could see that she was a good mother. She saw Geof refilling his glass again and, radiating maternity, scolded him gently. But he paid no heed to her of course.

They played another rubber, and then the game broke up with Dot and Geof a dollar to the good.

Dudley offered to drive Kitty home. She lived only a few blocks away, but he took her for a fast spin to show off his driving ability. When he stopped to turn back he remembered his flask and pulled up by the roadside; and presently when they reached her house he followed her up the steps to say good night.

The night was pleasant and the hammock inviting. She felt she ought to go in, but the moonlight and the liquor made her sentimental.

Early in the evening, while she and the Aldriches had been waiting, they had discussed Dudley and Jean, and she agreed with Dot. Jean must be a very selfish woman and a most unsatisfactory wife. She was faithful to him, Dot supposed, but that was about all, and she wouldn't be surprised to hear one day that she wasn't even that.

One of those typical New York girls who wanted to be grand!

"It must be rather rough on you," Kitty said ruminatively, "being married to some one who's always out with people like Miss O'Doone."

"I'm not very keen about it," he admitted. "But there's no use kicking."

"You're not that kind yourself."

"What kind?"

"Artistic and all that. It's all right I guess if you're one of them, but give me a homey sort of life. Like Dot and Geof. It certainly is a pleasure to spend an evening in their home, isn't it? With everything just so."

"Yes," Dudley sighed, sinking back in the hammock, "but you can't have everything."

Through the railing of the veranda she could see his car. What a shame it was that girls like Jean always managed to get his kind! And then didn't appreciate him! That maybe was the secret. The worse you treated a man the crazier he was about you!

That thought made her put his arm from about her, but when he held her, she slipped back in his embrace and grew careless for a while to his caresses. She never permitted married men to fondle. But for some reason he didn't seem to belong in that category. She wasn't violating any sacred bond. With Geof it would be different. There was Dot. But Jean wasn't being hurt because as likely as not she was doing the same thing herself. Olive O'Doone and that crowd stopped at nothing, and you couldn't go with people and not do as they did. And "Enchantment" told you enough.

No wonder Dudley didn't think so much of them.

The moonlight made her attractive to him. The liquor warmed his blood, loosened his tongue and urged him to say extravagant things that he didn't mean.

It did more. It urged him to an acute need of conquest. The girl didn't matter. Almost any one would have served. The manifestation of it was sex but the urge was the chafing of his spirit, the need to assert himself superiorly.

But Kitty stopped him. Her curious code of what was and what wasn't permissible had its precise limitations, a code dictated possibly by her knowledge of herself. Moreover, her intentions regarding him were serious and she wanted to retain his respect.

"No, dear, you mustn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because—"

"Because what?"

"You know!"

"Tell me. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know—but you don't love me."

"I might get to."

"Don't be silly. You're married to Jean. And you love her."

"I like you—awfully. Honest."

"No." She pulled herself free and got up. "I've got to go in," she said, steadying her voice. "Say good night and go. It's a long way."

Her lips burned into his in a good-night kiss. She watched him stumble a little drunkenly to his car and

drive off. Then she turned towards the door, distraught and on the verge of tears.

II

Thanks to Jefferson Johns, a decorative colored gentleman, and to her own cleverness in not keeping within the confines of the literary world, Olive O'Doone's party was a distinct success.

The stars of the realm were invited of course—Jude Taylor, Tierbaum, Clair Donnet and the Warrs—and a few chosen obscure ones, but there were also people of the theater and rebels out of Society. Leila Robbins, for instance, who had millions. It was Miss Robbins, in fact, who was responsible for Jefferson Johns. Olive had met him at her house, and if Leila could have him for dinner, surely she could afford to introduce him into her really Bohemian sphere.

Nor was she wrong. Johns was the symbol of unconvention. He was the extraordinary in that roomful of extraordinary people that helped them to believe in their own extraordinariness.

Tall and angular with slicked oiled hair parted in the middle, he was of a café-au-lait color that under Olive O'Doone's dim lighting became mauve; he was a painting by one of the moderns come alive. Careful of his speech, and doubly careful of his manners, he was a gentleman by mimicry. And because he was a savage at heart, this business of behavior was pretty to watch. It went with his parted hair and the gardenia in his buttonhole. The pity of him lay in his victimization. His white friends found him moralless and taught

him to be immoral. He whored and pimped for them innocently, because he felt it was expected of him. But the time might come when he would do these things with the viciousness of the people for whom he did them now. Then he would be lost and horrible.

When Jean met him she was doubly glad that Dudley had decided not to come. Another proof of the rottenness of that crowd! He would have talked for weeks about the nigger who was at Olive's party. And his derision would know no bounds. Olive or one of them ought to go and live with him in Harlem—just for the experience. And then write a book about the art of a coon's soul! "My Love-life with a Nigger!"

And on the face of it he would be right.

Jean at first was a little uncomfortable, but when Johns talked to her she too fell under the spell of his charm. He told her about his friend, Homer Thomas, and then she found a fine justice in the opening of a door to him.

Homer Thomas, he said, was the best Ethiopian writer in the world, and when the book he was writing was finished the world was going to hear from him in a big way.

"The stranges' thing about it is that it ain't 'bout anything in particular. Just a family of Ethiopians up in Harlem who have a hard time gettin' along. The story ain't anythin' at all. 'Most any one could 've thought it up. But you just can't wait to hear more. I stop in mos' every night to hear the last he's written, an' the other night he had one of them fall sick, Henry his name is, and I swear to goodness I felt goose-

pimples breakin' out all over me, I was so scared he was goin' to die. You know Ethiopians die awful easy. Especially if there's white blood in the family. Homer's got white blood in him. Not much, but enough, as Homer says, to cause a pile of trouble. That's one of his theories. He thinks the colored race might amount to something if they kept to theirselves. But I think just the opposite. If it weren't for his white blood, I tell him, he'd be runnin' an elevator mos' likely instead of contributin' to literature."

And on and on with an utter lack of self-consciousness, revealing himself and Homer as earnest people in whose simple hearts were poetry and peace and hope.

Max Moses, one of the obscure ones, joined them, having overheard Johns' monolog, and quizzed him about other negro artists whose work Moses knew. Then Leila came over and took him away to sing spirituals.

Moses was a serious young man with dark observing eyes and a finely cut sensual mouth. Jean knew him only by his one novel which hadn't created much of a stir. He was at work on a new one now. Ultimately he wanted to write a novel of Harlem.

"A real one," he explained. "The kind that Johns' friend is doing."

Johns sang and the doorbell continued to ring and more guests arrived. Among them Jude Taylor and Propatkin.

Taylor saw Jean and scanned the room for Dudley. When he didn't find him he strolled across the room

and greeted her, carefully ignoring Moses; in fact, driving him off. But Moses doggedly sat him out.

"Where's the husband tonight?" Taylor enquired.

"He's got a new love," Jean told him. "A shiny roadster."

"Well, I congratulate you!" And he laughed: "We'll have that long-promised little dinner yet. You might not suspect it, but I'm one of the most faithful lovers the world has ever known!"

"Persistent," she suggested.

Not liking that he said "Huh!" and went in search of a drink.

"So you're married," Moses said quietly. "I didn't think you were. You don't look married."

"How is one supposed to look when one is married?"

"Well," he said slowly, "you're too—fresh-looking. If I said 'clean' you'd misunderstand me. You and your husband must be quite happy together."

"Yes—we are."

She saw Propatkin smiling at her from the other side of the room and because Moses looked suddenly depressed she went over to the older man. Since her return to Keats she had met him quite often. His book on Russia had been very well received, and the Revolution was two more years behind him.

The room buzzed with voices and laughter as tray after tray of cocktails vanished. Johns still sang. But not spirituals. Jude Taylor and some others made up a quartet and sang hymns drunkenly. And then Johns was persuaded to sing "My Daddy Rocks Me with One Steady Roll."

He was a different Johns now, a sly lecherous savage who seemed to love the taste of the salacious words he sang out; and his animal eyes aglint with promise roved solicitingly from woman to woman.

Jean and Propatkin sat together listening. Propatkin was watching Johns, and Jean, Propatkin, wondering what he was thinking of it all.

"From an old print of the period!" she said, smiling. "New York! How do you like it?"

"I like it very much. Don't you?"

"I don't know. It's either—magnificent, or just the opposite. If I were you—a foreigner—perhaps I'd be able to judge. But I'm part of it, and I can't see the forest for the trees."

"Well," he said, his eyes still on Johns, "birth is never beautiful. I remember once when I was a young man I had to assist a peasant-girl in labor. When it was over I wanted to kill myself. The idea of being part of humanity whose beginning was so hideous was intolerable. Of course I was very young. That's how I see it. So I wouldn't despair if I were you. The baby will justify the ugliness. It's the same with Russia, except that poor Russia has only just conceived!"

Jean laughed at the absurd analogy. A country as a woman, big with child. And yet why not?

"What a baby that will be!" she exclaimed.

"So is this one," he said, "and we're in on the birth! That is to say, I am. A spectator. You're part of it. Part of that baby."

"Sometimes," she said, "I'm a spectator too."

"That's the trouble. Don't be. Stay part of it and then

it'll always be—magnificent. It is," he insisted. "Believe me, it is."

That to the accompaniment of

"Ma daddy rocks me with one steady roll!
There's no slippin', Hon', once he takes hol'!"

It miraculously changed the aspect of things and made the evening a happy one. Her fears that constantly kept her on the brink of these parties and made her feel like an outsider vanished, and she felt merged for once in the spirit of the room.

Propatkin had answered her riddle.

"That's how I see it," he had said.

Well, that's how she saw it too; and henceforth when she was perplexed she would remember his words:

"The baby will justify the ugliness. . . . You're part of it. Part of that baby."

People continued to drop in even after midnight. The room was a fog of tobacco smoke and gin fumes. Johns was the center of a big circle gathered in communion of story-telling. It buzzed in low whispering and broke into guffaws of laughter. A few of the men steered drunken courses to the drinks table and back. Some of the women were drunk too; blear-eyed they lounged on couches and pretended to be sleepy.

Later there was talk of transferring the whole party to Harlem. Johns knew a place that they could have all to themselves. He'd get some entertainers. This had

been a great party but you couldn't keep the excitement going forever. Those who weren't for it would be going soon anyway.

Jude Taylor begged Jean to come. He said she could bring old Propatkin if she wanted, to insure his not making love to her. But she refused. It was late and she had to get to an office in the morning.

Max Moses followed her out and insisted upon driving her home.

Two or three times during the evening he had sought her out, sat beside her and tried in his serious way to evoke her interest without showing it. Then he made conversation: shop, books, people.

Now alone with her in the cab he was silent all the way to her door.

"Well, here we are," she said, as the car drew up.

"Yes," but he didn't open the door at once. "I'd like to see you again. May I?"

"Why, of course," she said lightly. "You must come and dine with us some time."

"I thought perhaps you'd have lunch with me one day this week."

"Well," she spoke hesitantly, "I'm generally too busy to worry much about lunch. But call me up and we'll see."

He escorted her to the door, opened it with her key, handed it back to her. She thanked him and said good night and went up to the apartment, troubled by the anticipation of his telephoning her at the office and having to put him off. Better to have told him right out

that she wasn't interested in any man except her husband. But that took too much for granted. And anyway he'd have said: "Well, can't we be friends?"

She thought of Elinor Stronach and smiled to herself. The worst of it was she liked him. It wasn't fair though, it seemed, for a woman to try to be friends with a man unless she had love in mind. No matter how remote the possibility, then it was fair; for what else had he ultimately in mind even though he had no real thought of it yet? Otherwise no. You weren't in the running and so you had no right to the field. Not even the pasturage of an innocent luncheon.

She crept in quietly, expecting to find Dudley in bed and asleep.

He came in while she was undressing.

"Hello. Just get in?"

"Yes. What did you do? Play bridge?"

"Yes. That friend of Dot's was there—Kitty what's-her-name. How was the party? Same old gang! Gabbing their heads off about themselves!"

"More or less," she said evasively, and changed the subject to stocks. "How's the market been treating us? I've been so busy I haven't had time to look for a week."

"Great. General Electric's up over twenty and that other stuff of yours is in for a split."

"And your things?"

"Oh, they're going up too."

But his tone made her doubt him. It didn't matter much because their holdings were ridiculously small, and there was no use arguing with him because, as he said, he was in the game and she wasn't. But it was silly

in their circumstances to gamble. The idea was to save. She was glad now that she had insisted upon his buying sound reputable stocks for her. If he wanted to take flyers with his money that was his own concern.

She calculated roughly that she must have over two thousand dollars. In the next few months she'd have a thousand more. Now if anything happened, she wouldn't mind. She was a few days late, and she didn't know if she was glad or not. Ever since the abortion she had been haunted by an absurd but nevertheless terrifying notion that perhaps she might never be able to become pregnant again. A ridiculous justice that had its genesis in an old-fashioned idea of God. There had been such cases though, she had heard. She touched her breasts in the hope of detecting soreness. Last time they had been sore almost at once. But there wasn't the slightest soreness. She knew then that she would be glad if she were that way. What made her doubt it was Dudley, but she didn't admit it; and before the thought could crystallize in her mind she crushed it and thought of something else. Max Moses for an instant. And then Merrie drinking. How silly of him! Still, poor old dear, he didn't have much fun in his life!

III

Towards the end of the month Jean made an appointment to see the doctor who had helped her out of her trouble the preceding autumn.

The perambulator in the hall and the ostentatious furnishings of that lavish room brought back a memory of those days. In retrospect they seemed more unhappy

than perhaps they had been. So little time in actual months had elapsed since then and yet, looking back, the image she had of herself was of a very immature girl. Had she grown so much these past eight or nine months, or in another brief span of time would she look back again upon a scornful self?

She had given her real name this time, but when she was ushered in to him he remembered her at once.

"So you're married!" he exclaimed, greeting her. "Happy?"

"Oh, yes—quite."

He examined her and assured her of that which she already knew.

"I came to you because you were so kind to me before. I was married then you know."

"You were!" He feigned surprise.

"You knew I was!"

"Well," he admitted reluctantly, "I may have suspected."

"If you'd known for sure, would you still have—helped me?"

"Perhaps," he said dubiously.

"I'd like to think you would have."

"Why?"

"Because it meant such a lot to me then, I suppose. And if now I didn't want a baby, I'd like to know I needn't have it."

"Yes," he said, "that would be very nice, but we haven't got there—yet. The average intelligence in this country is just over eleven. Think what would happen if the average person was allowed—well, freedom!"

"Well," she asked, "how do you decide who should have—freedom?"

"In your case," he told her, smiling that careful smile of his, "I only had to look in your face!"

He walked with her through the hall where the perambulator stood and opened the door for her.

"I appreciate your coming to me," he said. "I'm getting very good—at faces!"

Dudley, when she told him, was torn between many emotions. His mind winged to Kitty Frazer and then to his car and then to general conditions. Their manner of life, their finances. Then back to Kitty because they were lovers now. He didn't love her. He hadn't even thought he did, not even when he told her so.

"Why didn't you tell me—before?" he demanded.

"I wasn't sure."

"Even so, you must have thought you were that way." A week or two would have made a most profound difference. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know, Dudley." And she spoke the truth.

Several times she had been on the verge of telling him and then hadn't. Now if she had to say why she hadn't, for the life of her she couldn't. A mood perhaps, a moment, an hour when she had felt close to him, and she would have told him.

"Still, I don't see that it matters much. You're glad, aren't you?"

"Of course—of course."

He kissed her, held her tight in his arms, and tried to feel the warm rush of tender emotion that had

swept through him before. They were going to have a child! His child!

"Of course I'm glad, Jean. Of course I am. I just wish you had told me about it before." He'd tell Kitty the next time he saw her, and she'd see right away that they couldn't go on seeing each other. Except casually sometimes at Geof's house. If she made a fuss, he'd tell her to go to the devil. It had been her fault just as much as his anyway. But inwardly he blamed Jean. She ought to have told him!

They spent the evening at home. Which was rare nowadays. Alone together they went as a rule to a play or a movie. Often Jean waded through stacks of manuscripts; then Dudley went where he pleased. On other nights she went to play bridge with his friends, or he went grudgingly to her literary parties. But tonight was an exception: it should, they both felt, be spent quietly together.

They sat on the couch together, Jean, peaceful, half-lying in his arms. Now and then he kissed her cheek. Now and then he asked questions.

"You'll stop working now?"

"Well, not yet. Not for quite a while."

"For good, I mean?"

"I don't know."

"If we stay in town we'll have to get a bigger place."

"Yes," she said noncommittally.

He felt he ought to urge the country as he had before. A little house in the suburbs. Everything as he used to picture it. Jean at home with the baby. He commuting back and forth from the city. Like Dot and

Geof. Now he was afraid to question her too closely as to what she had in mind lest her ideas were precisely those. He liked things as they were. He had rebelled against them at the time, yes; but now he liked them. And try as he would he couldn't get up the old enthusiasm for the baby. His car kept cropping into his head. He might have to give it up!

"When will it be born?" he asked presently.

"In February, I think. Maybe a little before."

Well, by then he'd be due for another raise. But there'd be three people then. Three people on a hundred and twenty-five per week. Now with Jean working they had almost two hundred for just the two of them. It meant all the difference between having what you wanted and doing without.

They'd have the baby of course! It'd be as cute as hell.

IV

Summer came, and it rained. It was unseasonable and cold. And there were the usual short spells of insufferable heat.

Jean went on working.

She was not physically uncomfortable as many women are and, apart from the insistent knowledge that her body was quick with a new life, she was as before, dividing herself between an office that stimulated her mind and a home that fed (or should have fed) the emotional side of her nature.

Of the two the office was the more fulfilling. It was a garden she tended with infinite toil. The ground was hard. It held barren patches that she despaired of ever

making fertile. But in the main it flowered and, looking back at what it had been or looking forward to its prospects, she couldn't help but be encouraged and content.

The home was different. Only looking back was it beautiful. So many of the flowers were dead, and weeds with long tangling roots were choking the ones that remained. Perhaps it was due to neglect; perhaps, because of some incomprehensible law, you weren't permitted both gardens; perhaps because the most beautiful flower in the world bloomed only once in perfection, and when its petals commenced to fall you should weep if you must but not look for another blossom to burst from the same stalk.

Perhaps that was it. Who was to say? Only life, fleeting, fleeting, fleeting; and the courage in your heart that let you take life in your hands and examine it bravely.

In August they went to Mildeen in Connecticut, and passed a pleasant enough two weeks. They had the car and motored.

Dudley talked a lot about the baby, and his desire for Jean was restrained and at the same time whetted. There was mystery and a new warmth in her perceptibly changing body.

"I'm glad you're going to have it, Jean," he often said. "It'll be ours."

It wasn't the Mildeen of the past summer, when she had lain under the pines and the pines had seemed to belong to her. And the island and the beach and the boats.

Without him they would have belonged to her again and she would have been at peace. Yet she wanted him with her. A strange paradoxical offshoot of that once fair flower, it harbored in tenderness the semblance of love, so that sometimes she took the one for the other and clung to the illusion because she wanted it to be real.

Before the two weeks were over she was anxious for the Sunday night to come so that she could return to town and the office. Elinor wrote her the news, but she was worried about Elinor herself.

The friendship with Floyd Howe had spun itself into love upon her part and into God-knows-what upon his. He was a little mad anyway and her inhibited passion was a goad that might drive him to commit a folly.

She was concerned about Merrie too, although Elinor wrote that he was behaving himself.

Then there were the manuscripts, the people who had written them and who looked to her for success. Their successes passed through her to them. Their triumphs were hers.

She could hardly wait to get down to the office on Monday.

The day sped by on exciting enough wings. So did the next day and the next. But gradually she became aware of a curious change in herself, a condition of the mind, it seemed to be, against which she was constantly struggling.

The office and all it stood for had no real importance.

She grew acutely conscious of this one evening as

she struggled to read a play. It was a fine play. Her brain told her so, but her emotions were dead to it. And if her brain hadn't been trained to a high degree of discrimination she would have set it down as stupid.

In the days that ensued, this condition aroused an extraordinary conflict in her, in which her brain got the worst of it. All plays seemed stupid to her. To write plays was stupid. Shadowy puppets that had no real being but that like marionettes were yanked through invented happenings at the end of a string!

Soon everything took on the same aspect.

Nothing mattered, nothing was vital except the life inside her womb. That mattered. All else was insignificant and had no special value. But this nameless half-formed tissue of life within her had little hands that clutched her to itself. It sealed up her eyes against the outside world. It put those little hands over her ears so that she couldn't hear.

The doctor laughed when she told him.

"Having a baby isn't quite like incubating an egg," he said. "I told you before you went away that you shouldn't go back to work."

"But it seems so absurd," she complained. "I can't just sit at home and do nothing—like a vegetable."

"But you can't quarrel with nature. She's been doing this breeding stunt for a good many centuries and she knows what she's about. And if you don't give in to her one way she'll take it out of you another."

"How? You mean—on the baby?"

"No," he said. "The baby'll take care of itself. On you. Just be a vegetable for a while and let the baby

absorb you. It will anyway. Is that all that's troubling you?"

"That's all—except I'm terribly nervous."

"What makes you nervous?"

"Everything." She was on the verge of telling him about Dudley, who made her more nervous than anything.

Often in the evening she would pretend to have manuscripts to read so that he would go out. She couldn't stand him fussing over her. And yet when he went out she wanted him back. She didn't understand it, but she refrained from speaking about it because he might think they weren't happy together.

"Stop work," he urged her, "and you'll be all right."

She took his advice. She had to.

In October they moved to a bigger apartment, high enough up so that the baby would have fresh air.

Dudley was relieved when she decided on the apartment. Usually so decisive, she had hesitated until the last minute, and although she had never spoken about going to live in the suburbs he knew that it must be sometimes in her mind. Now with the apartment, almost twice as expensive as the other one, she would go on with her work after the baby came. His fears lifted. He was able to love her unreservedly. And look forward happily to the big event.

The days dragged by.

She still read manuscripts because it helped pass the time; she read them to amuse herself and left their judgment to Merrie. He or Elinor came often to tell

her the gossip. She listened to them with simulated interest and was glad when they went.

Nothing mattered. She was alone in a world outside their world.

Sometimes it frightened her. If this was motherhood, if this indomitable sense of possession existed now, and she was willing to yield herself to it, surely it would be doubly strong when the child came. She would belong to it as utterly then as she did now.

Fear and often depression enveloped her.

She walked every day in the park. The trees had shed their foliage, they were dry sapless lyres through which the wind mournfully sang. But in the rain the branches glistened and seemed alive.

She wished Alan Stover were in town. He would walk with her and understand her moods. She could talk about the baby to him and he would feel with her the lonely fulfillment of her vast sealed-up world. But he was in Arizona with Eric Ponsonby, a young Englishman.

He had gone to help Eric make a final bid for life against tuberculosis. He had given up his job to go. There was nothing altruistic in his going, however; his strange passion for the stricken youth left him no choice.

He called up one day and said Eric had died. And he was back with Warr. When could he see her? He'd like to come round now.

The sunburn disguised him not at all. If anything it emphasized his frailty; it merely daubed a gray, haunted mask with chrome and vermilion.

Eric was dead. That's all he knew. He was back with Mr. Warr but he couldn't stay there. He couldn't stay anywhere.

Jean had hoped that they would go for a walk, but when she saw him she ordered tea.

He said he was glad she was going to have a baby, and then went back to talk of Eric. He told of their life out there, of the fight they had made. He told how Eric, one hideous night, had died in his arms.

She wanted to stop him. It made her angry to have to visualize the horrible picture he drew. She knew he was suffering. Her eyes saw him suffering. She was sorry for him too, but her heart didn't go out to him in his agony. She said things designed to comfort him a little. He mustn't talk about dying too! He mustn't even think such things!

She was glad when he went away.

It was the same with Elinor whom she thought she loved.

Elinor had agreed finally to yield to Floyd Howe. It had taken her weeks and weeks to summon up the courage. At last she had said "Yes." Last night she had dined with him, as they often dined together, and went to his apartment.

"It sounds foolish, I know," she said, dabbing at her red eyes and biting back the tears. "It seems such a little thing to do."

But there her courage had failed her. She couldn't give herself to him. Not like that. There was a dreadful scene. He had tried to force her. Of course he couldn't.

She didn't blame him for that; she had provoked him beyond all possible reason.

"And then what?" Jean asked.

"I got out—and went home."

Today at the office she had received a letter from him —or rather a line—saying that she was vile beyond any conception of woman and that he was returning to his wife.

She gave Jean the piece of paper so she could read it for herself, and sat there, her face buried in her hands, sobbing her heart out. She had never loved before! Never! She never would again!

How foolish it sounded! How foolish it was! A girl and a man and their bodily desire for each other! The stupid agony and the stupid tears.

"Ah, but you mustn't, dear—you mustn't. You will love again. It'll be the love you want."

Just words . . . hollow-sounding, meaningless.

The child stirred and she knew only her womb. Elinor might not have been there.

V

Jean meant very much more to her mother than Jean ever knew. Sylvia's wasn't a demonstrative nature. And while at home in those latter years she had little enough of her daughter, when you have nothing a little becomes a great deal.

Her marriage left Sylvia terribly alone. She sought Josie Montague's society more and more, until she was deprived of even that, until an old flame of Josie's youth asked her to marry him. He offered her financial

security, and, as she was tired of trying to keep young, she accepted him and went to live in Kansas City.

Then Sylvia had no one.

Her loneliness at times was so acute as to be well-nigh intolerable. It was an illness that wasted her bodily. She turned in desperation to Christian Science but she didn't have the mind for it; besides, what she wanted was human association and not spiritual peace through meditation. She cried all day. She woke up crying. The doctor diagnosed it as melancholia and prescribed a complete change.

Mr. Hurd thought that was the most sensible thing he had heard for a long time. Between them they induced her to go on a six months' cruise through the Panama Canal to the Orient. It was expensive but essential, from Mr. Hurd's point of view, to her health and incidentally to his.

She left, tearful and frightened, in June.

Jean was with child then but she did not tell her. She kept it from her in her letters until the boat was on the last lap of its journey home. Sylvia was furious of course. She said she would never have gone if she had known!

She came home rejuvenated. She laid it to the Social Hall.

"We got to be like one big family," she said. "I didn't like it so much when we stopped at places. Then everybody went off by themselves, although I must say Mrs. Jermyn and her husband were awfully good to me. But when we got going again it was, as I say, like one big family."

Jean was in her last unendurable month. Her body was a weight of lead. Her mind was lead too. She thought only of freeing herself of the burden that drained all the substances of her being. She looked forward to the coming of the pain that she understood was incomparable to any other pain without the slightest trepidation. It would be short-lived. It would release her.

Sylvia came every day. She remembered her own travail, and felt again through Jean the pleasure of pregnancy without suffering its discomfort. Gladly would she have taken her place, but not for anything would she have deprived her of the inward happiness she must be experiencing.

In the retrospection of twenty-five years, maternity shone with a heavenly radiance. Her heart warmed a little even towards Dudley, for whom she had always entertained a secret dislike.

Dudley resented her greatly. She was trying to edge in on the baby! She was always there when he got home from the office, and often she stayed on, practically uninvited, for dinner. Then he'd have to drive her home.

"You'll be sure and phone the minute anything happens, Dudley," she'd say several times between their house and hers. "You know how anxious I am!"

How anxious she was! As though he wasn't anxious at all!

His mother wasn't like that. She stayed where she belonged, and didn't interfere! If she continued to

interfere after the baby came, there'd be a row. It was all he could do to keep his temper with her now.

The probable date the doctor had set came and passed. Eight unprepared-for days dragged by, each one longer and more suspenseful than the one before. Waiting. Imagining she felt pain. Hopeful, nervous, frightened.

Then long hours again.

The objects in the room became indelibly branded on her mind; the image of them would be there always. The clock, the candles, an etching of Arizona desert by Groll that Alan Stover had sent her, a gray china cat.

She thought of men sitting in a prison cell waiting to die. Their hearts too must beat to a swinging pendulum, and their eyes grow blind looking at a crack in the wall.

The pain came at last, a new kind of pain—faint, slow, intermittent. She was happy then. Her mother was with her.

Mrs. Hurd called Dudley at the office; and then a taxi.

Late that night when she came down from the delivery room, she saw Dudley and her mother, as she was being wheeled into her room. They looked white-faced and troubled. She tried to smile and reassure them.

The baby, she understood, was a girl.

Presently Dudley and her mother came timorously into her room, looked down at her and kissed her. They were deeply affected.

"Was it—awful?" Dudley asked in a choked whisper.

"Yes."

"Thank God it's over!"

She wanted only to sleep.

When she woke in the morning the sun was shining brightly through a cleft in the drawn blind. A fine day. Then she remembered, and her hands went to her abdomen to assure herself that it was true.

Yes. Her body ached as though it had been horribly beaten. But it didn't matter. The baby was out of her. It was in the crèche with a lot of other babies. She wondered what it looked like. She reached for the bell-cord to summon the nurse but she didn't ring it. She'd see it later.

When they brought it to her, she looked at it with curiosity mingled with a certain awe.

"It's a beautiful baby," the nurse said. "Nearly nine pounds."

"Are you sure that that one's my baby?" Jean asked, searching the little mottled face for a resemblance to Dudley or to herself.

"Why, of course it is," she was told irritably. "As soon as they're born they put an identification disc on them. Look!"

"But I'd think with all the babies here they might get mixed up sometimes."

"Not here," the nurse snapped. "Perhaps in some other places where they aren't careful, but certainly not here. Would you like her alongside of you for a little? You'll have to start nursing her by and by."

She watched how the nurse held her with one hand while she pulled down the covers of the bed with the other.

Then she was there beside her, her child, lying in the crook of her arm. Looking down she could see the tip of her pink nose. She lay still and rigid, not daring to hug her close to her. Even that she would have to learn.

The nurse went out of the room.

It was a strange feeling to be alone for the first time with the flower of your body. For so long it had been dependent upon you, its very life-beat throbbing in unison with yours. Now it had a life-beat of its own. Everything of its own. Completely, completely detached. It from her, and she from it.

"Well, what do you think of her?" the nurse asked cheerily, coming briskly into the room.

"I haven't really seen her yet."

"You'll see all you want of her by-and-by." She was a sardonic soul. "What are you going to call her?"

"Doris, I think."

"Well, you'll have to make up your mind. It's got to go on the registration card and they'll be asking for it downstairs." Expertly she picked her up, rearranging the covers. "Doris! There's not many Dorises. I suppose you'd rather have had a boy. Most of 'em do, 'specially when it's the first."

"My husband wanted a boy, but I didn't care which it was."

"Maybe you'll have a boy next time."

The memory of the night before was too fresh in her

mind. She shuddered a little. It didn't escape the nurse. She laughed and, at the door, held little Doris up and waved one of her tiny hands at her mother.

The hours drifted by.

It was pleasant there in that simple white room filled with flowers. Quietness over everything. Quietness over her mind that after so long a time was set free again. The baby was in its little basket. A good way down the hall, in the crèche. Detached from her by space. Detached from her mind too.

She found in the days that followed, even after she had started to nurse her, that she could forget about her for hours on end.

VI

In six weeks she was back at the office.

She read in the newspaper on her way downtown that it was the first day of spring. Remembering a former springtide she walked blocks in search of a florist shop and bought a geranium.

"Well," she said, bursting into Merrie's office where he was dictating to Elinor, "here I am after all the excitement of helping to populate the world, and here's a geranium because the paper says it's spring!" She put the flower on his desk, and rubbed her frozen hands, for, spring or no spring, outside it was bitterly cold.

Her own office was bedecked with roses to welcome her.

Merrie followed her inside, smiling his jerky little smile. He was so elated at having her back that he couldn't say anything for a while. The sight of her made him tremble a little. He had seen her at home of

course, but here in her office clothes she was his, and his eyes couldn't help devouring her to see what change a child had wrought in her.

A little shivering pain shot through him as he observed the fullness of her breasts, the general matronliness of her figure. The Jean of his dreaming was gone!

She'd change back though, he thought. When she stopped nursing it.

Then he thought: It'd be a good thing if she got even unattractive.

His image of her would fade then, his dreaming would cease. What a beast he was! The minute he saw her! How she'd hate him if she knew!

He remembered the vows he had made himself one night last autumn when he had stolen out in the back yard and smashed two bottles of whiskey. Well, he wouldn't do that at least!

"Are you sure," he asked, steadying his voice, "you're strong enough to be back?"

"Strong enough!" she laughed. "I'm so full of pent-up energy, I don't know what to do. Five months of doing nothing! Of being a cow! And look at me! I look like a cow!" She drew her dress tight across her hips so that he could see for himself.

"You'll get thin again," he murmured, troubled.

"Twenty-five pounds thinner—and quick too! But the brat isn't weaned yet and the doctor won't let me go on a diet until it is."

"Have you got a good nurse?"

"I think so. I've got a new one, Gertie, an Irish girl. I've only had her a week. I had to let the other one go.

She wanted to be one of the family and dine with us at night. She positively refused to eat in the kitchen with Eva. And she wouldn't let me touch the baby. She was quite insolent about it one day, and so I fired her." She wandered about the room as she talked, enjoying its bookish officey atmosphere.

Then she threw herself in her desk chair and lighted a cigarette.

"But don't let's talk baby. Tell me the news."

They plunged into shop.

It was glorious to feel her mind being stimulated again, fun to hear the gossip of that world of printed words, flattering to realize that the machine that her brain had builded and guided had been running practically under its own impetus during her absence. Merrie was the boss, but she provided the energy that made the engine go uphill and across rough new ground.

"So you see," he said, "there's plenty for you to do!"

"And the first thing I'm going to do," she told him, "is to get some one else in here. I know just the person. Alan Stover. He's with Mr. Warr."

"Alan Stover," Merrie frowned. "What's he like?"

"Well, the only thing against him—if you want to count it against him," she explained, "is that he's homosexual. But he's got a fine literary taste, and he's not awfully happy where he is."

"Well, let's try him out."

Inwardly he was glad that Stover was what he called one of those unfortunates. He wouldn't mind

him around. At the first mention of his name, a spurt of jealousy had burned through him. Stover would be like another woman.

All day they worked together. Sometimes he came into her office; sometimes she came to his.

Late in the afternoon, as he grew tired, his murky brown eyes watched her across the desk with the coral-flowered geranium between them.

Such an innocent thing! She had bought it and put it there innocently.

She hadn't really changed so much. Or was he getting used already to a more voluptuous Jean? Or, if the change were twice as marked, if she became quite ugly, would it make no difference?

He switched on the lights and forced his mind to concentrate on business, unhappy because he was so weak. The most miserable man in all the world. He had made himself such fine promises!

Well, he'd keep them! He'd die first!

Suddenly a phrase came into his head:

"It is the hurts that are done to one innocently that are unforgivable!"

Perhaps he had read it somewhere, he thought. Rot anyway.

VII

Jean had to get rid of Gertie.

Gertie insisted upon sleeping with the windows tight closed. She said she always had. And while she kept the baby clean enough, her personal toilette left much to be desired.

"I wish you'd bathe a little more often," Jean said to

her one morning. She liked the girl, and she spoke quite kindly.

"I took a bath on Saturday," Gertie informed her.

"But you ought to bathe every day."

"Well, I never have," she grumbled. And in a flash her Irish temper got the better of her. "Look here, Mrs. Crome, if you're looking to find fault with me, you don't have to be looking any farther. I can get all the jobs I want, and for more money too, and without being insulted."

"I didn't insult you, Gertie."

"You did. You as much as said I was dirty."

"Well, so you are. And I won't stand insolence. So you'd better go."

Gertie packed her things and departed.

Jean phoned the office and told Elinor to get in touch with the people she had made appointments with and say she wouldn't be in today.

"Will you be in tomorrow, Jean?"

"I don't know. I had to let Gertie go and I'll have to take care of Doris until I get some one else."

The hospital that had supplied Gertie said they didn't have anybody else at the moment but they'd put Mrs. Crome's name down on their application list. In two or three days they might be able to find the sort of person she wanted.

"But I need some one now—at once."

"Well, we're sorry. We'll do the best we can."

Jean tried one or two of the agencies. There was no one in at the moment, but just as soon as some one came in they'd get in touch with her.

Mrs. Hurd came in in the afternoon and Jean was able to dash to the office for a couple of hours. Sylvia came nearly every day anyway. She adored the child.

"I don't see how you can leave her at all," she said. "I just couldn't, no matter who was here to look after her."

"You'd have to—if you had a job."

"I'd do without other things and give up the job."

"I'm not the baby-type, dear. I'd rather work and pay for a nurse. I only wish I could get a competent one."

A week, so far as work was concerned, was shattered.

A whole month, in fact, for in that time there were two nurses and two weeks of playing at nurse herself.

One of them was another Gertie, only more incompetent; the other left of her own accord: a former mistress wrote and said she had just had a second child and, as the woman still cherished an affection for the younger one, she thought she would be happier there.

Finally Mrs. Cruffit came—Selina Cruffit.

Jean didn't like her at first. She didn't like her appearance. A tallish very thin creature with black hair streaked with gray, a tight-lipped nervous mouth and dark not unbeautiful eyes, there was something forbidding about her. Nor did she seem over-strong. She said she had been married and widowed, and that for the past twelve years she had done nothing but take care of babies. She had a way with them. They thrived under her.

A sweetness that denied her austerity came into her face and her voice as she spoke about them, and, to

substantiate her claims, she gave Jean a number of surprisingly fine references to read. She was English-born but had lived more on the continent than at home, and her past mistresses, as those references would show, were all people of note—the Comtesse de Lursange, the Princess Braghesi, and others.

"You haven't been in this country very long then?"

"No, madam. Only a year. I came to live with my brother in Pennsylvania, but he is married again and doesn't need me."

So despite her appearance Jean engaged her. It was foolish, she reflected, to harbor a dislike for a person because she happened to be unattractive. The poor woman couldn't help her looks.

Dudley couldn't stand her. He said she reminded him of a crow.

"She'll crow the baby to sleep!"

"I hope she does. I can't crow her to sleep. I've been up every night with her for a week."

Cruffit, as she was called, made Doris sleep like a top. It was the way she had with them, she said. And in everything she turned out to be all that the princesses and comtesses had claimed for her—quiet, competent and respectful.

Jean was able to pick up the tangled threads of her work again. She left early in the morning and didn't get back until six or sometimes nearly seven. Later on when things were better organized she'd spend part of her day at home.

Her mother and Dudley, she knew, thought she was devoid of all maternal feeling. If they knew the effort

it cost her some mornings to hand Doris over to Cruffit they'd think differently. And often in the office she had to fight against an impulse to chuck up the work for the day and go home. But she had made up her mind not to indulge herself as regards the child and not to indulge the child as regards herself. Not only now but later. And what could she do for Doris now that Cruffit with her years of baby experience couldn't do ten times as well?

But, one day, when the threads at the office were smoothing out, Eva told her that Cruffit hadn't taken Doris out for three days.

"Why not?" she asked.

"I don't know, ma'am."

"But how do you know that she hasn't, Eva?"

Eva wasn't there during the day. She came in the morning, left about ten-thirty to work somewhere else and returned at five to get the dinner.

"The elevator man told me. He thought the baby was sick, and he asked me how she was. I said the baby ain't been sick, and then he told me."

"Thanks, Eva."

"Please don't say I said anything, ma'am. It'd only cause trouble."

Jean went into the nursery. Dudley had just come in and was watching Doris lying in Cruffit's arms peacefully sucking at her bottle.

"I'll take her," Jean said. And they exchanged places. "Where did you take her today when you went out?"

"I didn't take her out today, ma'am—nor yesterday."

"Why not?"

"She was running a little temperature," Cruffit said, "and I thought it was as well to keep her in."

"But why didn't you tell me she was running a temperature, Cruffit?"

"Oh, I didn't want to worry you needlessly. I know how mothers are! Especially when they've never taken care of a child. If there was any need for alarm I would have, of course."

"Is she running a temperature now?"

"No, ma'am, she's quite all right this evening."

"Well, in future," Jean said, fighting down her annoyance, "if there's the slightest thing the matter with her I want you to tell me."

"Very well, ma'am."

Four or five days later Eva greeted Jean at the door with a solemn face.

"I'd like a word with you, ma'am," she said in a low voice.

"What is it, Eva?"

"She's in there putting the baby to bed. If you'll get her out of the room, I'd like to show you something."

"Show me what?" Eva's grim tone filled her with alarm. "Tell me what it is."

"I'd rather you see for yourself."

"Is it something to do with Doris?"

"Well, that's for you to judge, ma'am."

Jean was furious with the woman, but Eva was a determined person and if she wanted to show rather than tell whatever it was, she wasn't to be bullied out of it.

Cruffit was her usual quiet self. She had just bathed

Doris and was making her ready for the night. Doris was gurgling with merriment. As soon as she saw Jean she stopped and commenced to fret.

"Good evening, ma'am."

"Good evening, Cruffit. How's baby tonight?" Her eyes roamed from the baby about the room searching for something strange.

"She's fine tonight. I weighed her just now and she's gained nearly a pound. Would you like to take her? I've just changed her."

Jean picked her up and held her close in her arms. She smelt sweet like a flower. And because Eva had frightened her a little ache of love passed through her.

Cruffit went to fix the bottle. Jean waited a moment and then called Eva. But Eva had seen her chance and was hurrying in.

"Well, what is it?" Jean demanded, putting Doris down on the bed.

Eva went to the bureau and pulled open the top drawer wide. Jean followed her and watched as, from the back of the drawer, she took out a small bundle wrapped in a towel.

Undoing it, Jean saw a tiny phial filled with white pellets, a hypodermic needle and a teaspoon, the underside of which was blackened as though it had been held over a match or a candle.

For an instant Jean didn't understand. Then it flashed upon her. A thousand terrifying thoughts made her mind mad. Cruffit's face. Her first interview with her. The strange feeling she had had and overcome. Doris not sleeping. And then sleeping like a top.

She flew to the child, undressed it, and searched its little body for tiny pin-pricks. There were none. She held the naked child close against her wildly beating heart and sat down, suddenly weak, on the edge of the bed.

Eva stood watching her from the bureau.

Then Cruffit came back. She stopped in the doorway, her dark eyes darting to the bureau. When she saw, her face went ashen and one hand went quickly to her mouth. Like a fury she crossed to Eva and snatched up the tell-tale things. And when she spoke her voice was a screech.

"Where did you get these from? How dare you mess about with my things?"

"I want you to go—now," Jean told her.

"All right—I'll go." She seemed utterly distracted. She remembered the bottle in her hand and took it to Jean. "I'll get my things together. . . . You'll give me my wages up to today?"

"Yes, of course. Get me my bag, Eva."

Cruffit took her suitcase from the closet and packed hastily. Jean watched her thin trembling hands, her wasted figure as it bent and stooped and then straightened up. Why hadn't she guessed? Why hadn't she trusted her first impression?

"Have you been giving that stuff to this child—to make it sleep?" she found the courage at last to demand.

Cruffit was putting on her hat. She turned and looked straight in Jean's eyes. Her face twisted and twitched.

"You don't have to ask that!" she snapped out, and

then started to cry. "You know better than to think such a thing!"

Sniveling and miserable, she straightened her hat and went out.

Presently Dudley came in.

Jean had put Doris off to bed and was sitting in the living-room still white-faced and shaken.

"Hello," he said, "how're you?"

She told him about Cruffit.

"Good God!"

"It made me positively ill."

"Well, I should think it might!" It made him suddenly ill too. He lighted a cigarette and threw himself in a chair.

All at once he was angry.

"Why the hell don't you look after your own kid?" he half shouted at her. "I told you she looked like a crow. How do you know she didn't give it the stuff? Christ Almighty!"

Jean left him and went into the bedroom. She lay down on the bed with his words ringing in her ears. She kept seeing Cruffit's wasted form bending, stooping, straightening.

In the morning the quest began again.

The agencies sent women, genteel and shabbily neat, some with splendid recommendations; the hospital sent girls with two years' hospital training.

Jean interviewed a dozen of them. One or two seemed to answer every requirement, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to engage them. As a servant who was constantly under her surveillance, yes; but the

person she sought wasn't a servant. Wasn't a stranger even. She had made that mistake before.

What did she know of these women who walked into her house for the first time? She studied their faces, seeking Cruffit in their eyes, and at the end of each interview she knew more surely that the person she was seeking was herself.

Warm days, already here, forced her to take Doris out.

She wheeled her in the perambulator through the streets to the park and sat on a bench in the sunshine. It was very pleasant. Sometimes another mother joined her, or a nurse, and they talked about babies. At home when she did for Doris, bathed and fed and watched over her, her whole heart seemed to lie in the grasp of those helpless baby hands.

But she—her mind, her being—was in another world. It owned her, called her, needed her. No one could fill her place, while almost any one, it seemed, could do all that she did for Doris.

Two weeks went by, three weeks, then four.

Things at the office were slowing down. Clients were getting uneasy. Many of them called her up at the house and told her pointblank that if she wasn't actively associated with Merrick Keats any longer they were going elsewhere. Nice chap, Keats. They all liked him. But what they wanted was action!

Dudley sensed that something was up when the days went by and Jean didn't engage a nurse. He knew why too. But he avoided discussing it. Every evening he came home he hoped there would be some one there,

and as long as Jean didn't bring up the unpleasant solution to their dilemma why should he?

His efforts to make a quick clean-up on the market had been disastrous. Not only had he lost everything but he actually owed several hundred dollars. If Jean quit work now, it would take him years to pay back what he owed, and as for taking a chance in the hope of getting back his losses—well, that would be never. He had got into the habit of spending too. He liked spending. It would be intolerable to have to count every penny.

His spirits rose when Jean told him that she thought she had found some one who would do.

"Gosh, I'm glad. When is she coming?"

"I don't know. I told her I'd let her know." She made herself comfortable on the sofa and lighted a cigarette. "I've persuaded Mother to take a house in the country —and take the baby."

"What!" He looked at her blankly.

"Then a nurse would be all right, if Mother were there to look after her."

"And you're going to give her the baby!"

"Not *give* her the baby, Dudley. Don't be so foolish! She'll take care of her. She'll be in the sunshine and fresh air. And we'll go out week-ends and see her—and evenings too if we want to."

"Like hell we will! D'you think I'm crazy?"

"Well, I can't take care of her myself and work, Dudley. I've tried."

"You could," he argued, "if you got the right kind of a nurse."

"I've seen dozens of nurses. They're all like the ones we've had. Any of those, except Cruffit, would have been all right if I'd been here. I thought I could hand the baby over to a nurse, but now I know I can't. Mother'll look after her. She loves her the way we do, Dudley. I don't want to give her up any more than you do, but when we both work what do we see of her anyway? A few minutes in the morning, and by the time we get home she's in bed. Besides, we ought to think what's best for her. It'll be summer soon and hot."

"It'll be hot there too . . . When did you get this wonderful idea? Why didn't you talk it over with me first?"

"There wasn't any use talking it over with you unless Mother agreed to it."

"Oh," he said sarcastically, "and now it's all settled, you're letting me in on it! Well, she's mine as much as yours and she's going to stay here—with me. If you can't find a nurse, I will. Give *your* mother the baby!" he sneered. "What about giving her to *my* mother?"

"Your mother's in Trenton."

And for a little they argued fiercely over the virtues and shortcomings of his mother and hers. Frankly he loathed Mrs. Hurd. And the old man with his theosophy was a nut! He'd be damned if he'd have any kid of his brought up in their house!

"We'll move out to the country," he said, consumed with anger and paternalism. "You can look after the kid yourself. I never wanted you to work anyhow. I told you so, didn't I? I knew it wouldn't pan out. And

if we're poor, well, there are a whole lot of other people poor too."

He warmed to a sense of righteousness. Now that he had said it he was glad; it had been in his heart for a long time. His love for the child made him want to sacrifice himself for it, but he didn't want to make any real sacrifice, and even as he spoke, he prayed that she would refuse to do as he suggested.

She refused very definitely.

"I'm not going to do that, Dudley. I'm going on with my work. Not only because of the money but because I want to. If Mother's willing to take the baby and you're not willing to let her have her, then I'll go too."

"And leave me!" he demanded.

"There'll be room for you too, if you want to come."

"Thanks! Me and your family!" The idea made him laugh.

"Well, it's one or the other," she told him conclusively. "You can have your choice."

He glared at her for a long minute. Then, with a sorrowful injured air, he said:

"You're a hell of a wife, Jean. And a hell of a mother."

VIII

Jean's love for Dudley had expired.

There was no use trying to persuade herself that it hadn't, and no use thinking that through circumstances or her own effort it could be resuscitated.

Perhaps she had never really loved him. That which had made her in love with him and so desirous of him

was something other perhaps than that divine emotion that grew with the years and lasted forever.

Or maybe she was incapable of it.

She had gone to him virginal, she had known no other man carnally, she had nurtured a child in her womb from his seed. But none of these links forged from the old formula had sufficed to hold her heart enchained.

The summer was passing. September rains were stripping the trees of their leaves. The landlord had sent a new lease to be signed.

In the matter of Doris, Dudley had capitulated.

Mrs. Hurd had moved out to Willow Gardens on Long Island and was comfortably installed in an old roomy house with the baby, a nurse, a Ford car, which she drove herself, and Mr. Hurd, who liked the country now that he was there and felt it was well worth the extra fifteen minutes it took him to get back from the office to his reading chair.

The idea of having a baby in the house hadn't appealed to him at all, but the prospect of having Sylvia occupied and diverted stopped him from voicing an objection. There would be two nuisances instead of one, he decided; but if one offset the other then he would be left in peace.

And peace he had. For the first time so long as he could remember he was able now to read without the consciousness of being damnably selfish. He owed a debt of gratitude to Doris. He almost felt love for the little mite.

It had taken all the remaining store of Jean's sav-

ings to establish the household, but she wanted to give the plan every chance of success. So much was at stake. If it worked she would have found the solution to her dilemma; if it didn't it would mean the choice of her work or the baby. And she knew which would win.

So far it had worked perfectly.

The first nurse turned out to be what Sylvia called "fly." She flirted with the chauffeurs in the neighborhood and stole out at night to go joy-riding. Sylvia suspected that she drank as well. But Alice, who had succeeded her, was a treasure. It was a shame, Sylvia used to say, that such a good warm-hearted creature should have been born so plain. Plain she was. But a homebody and a natural born mother, according to Sylvia. In the evening they played solitaire together.

Even Dudley seemed happy with the arrangement. He didn't say so, of course. But he ceased railing against Sylvia.

From a practical point of view he had every reason to be happy about it. Jointly he and Jean paid the nurse's wages, half the rent and half the food. He was supposed to pay half and Jean the other half. Latterly he had contributed nothing. His stocks were down and he needed every cent for margins, but he'd pay her back as soon as he could.

She had no idea of his finances any more. He didn't tell her and she had no reason for asking. She had tried to make him stop taking "flyers" on the market, and he said he had; but as he was perpetually hard up despite the fact that the market in general had been consistently good, she didn't believe him.

And she didn't much care. What troubled her was their personal relationship. She wanted to turn her cards face-up on the table and let him see that she no longer cared for him. But she hated to hurt him. Not loving him was hurt enough—if he still loved her. And apparently he did.

But what was she to do?

Often she went down to Willow Gardens during the week because she didn't want to spend the evening with him. He bored her.

Quite frequently he went out and came in late. Then she'd pretend to be asleep so he wouldn't disturb her. Not that he was repellent to her now. He never would be. But the passion his love-making roused in her left her empty and unhappy. Her body simulated love while her heart couldn't even simulate it. She gave nothing. She was left with a sense of having prostituted herself.

It was a wretched feeling; worse, she thought, than prostituting her body.

The lease brought it to an issue. To let Dudley sign it was tantamount to pledging herself to him for another whole year. Now he might even be expecting her to tell him, because he must know; but when the lease was signed she would tacitly have said:

"I still love you. I am still your wife."

Yet, when the lease came, she stuck it away in the desk and put off speaking about it from day to day. She wanted something to happen, some untoward happening that would give her special provocation.

But the tenor of their life flowed evenly now. They didn't even quarrel.

It was Dudley who finally spoke about it.

"By the way, the agent called me at the office today about the lease. Said he'd mailed it a couple of weeks ago."

They were undressing, getting ready for bed.

A shiver like ice went through her. "Yes, it's in the desk."

"Well, I'll sign it in the morning and send it back." He disappeared into the closet to hang up his trousers.

Jean glanced in the mirror at her white face. She looked straight into her own eyes. They queried the cowardice in her heart. It pounded with fear. Her eyes told her not to heed it.

Dudley came out of the closet and went on with his disrobing.

"I've been meaning to—to speak to you about—the lease," she forced out the words, "ever since it came. I don't want you to sign it."

"Why not? Don't you like it here? It's as good as we'll find anywhere for the dough."

She looked at him, wishing he would read the truth in her eyes. But he was quite oblivious. Light-hearted and happy tonight.

What if he loved her with the fierce strong love of a deep inarticulate soul! What did she know of him really? No more than he knew of her.

But no, he wasn't deep, his love wasn't fierce and strong!

"It isn't that, Dudley. It's—you—and me."

Now he was reading her. He tied the string of his pajamas and looked at her, frowning.

"I don't want to—go on."

"You don't—" He gulped down a sudden lump in his throat. "Why don't you? . . . Why—not?"

Terror-stricken, his mind winged to Kitty Frazer. Had she been mad enough to go to Jean and tell her? He'd kill her, by Christ! Had some one else told Jean? Kitty's mother? Her father? They didn't know. Kitty said they didn't. He'd asked her only the other night. She was always kidding him about being so scared of Jean's finding out. Maybe in some roundabout way she'd done it herself. Always saying she wasn't going to do it any more. And then weakening.

"What—what have I done," he demanded, "that—that you don't want to go on?"

"Nothing, Dudley—you haven't done anything."

"You're sure! Nobody's come and—and lied to you about me?"

"It's me, Dudley—me."

She never connected his emotion with fear, at least not the fear of guilt. It was pain that made his voice shake.

"*You!* You mean—you mean you've found some one else? . . . You've fallen for—for somebody?"

"No, Dudley, no. It isn't anything like that. There's nobody else."

"You're sure! You swear there isn't!"

If only there was! she thought. Then it would be easier.

"It's you and me, Dudley," she said again. "I'm not happy. Our marriage isn't a success. It can't be. You

live one life, I lead another. It isn't your fault and it isn't mine. We fell in love—and got married. The falling in love was all right but the getting married wasn't. And now that the love's—well, not what it was, I—I just don't want to go on."

He heard her out. The relief of knowing that she had no inkling of his affair and hadn't fallen in love with some one else herself dwarfed any other consideration into nothingness.

It was only as she went on that he comprehended her deadly seriousness.

"Oh," he said slowly, bewildered for the moment, "so that's it!"

"Yes."

Now that she had said it once it was easy to say it again more elaborately. Reminding him of this and of that. Talking quietly, as she had often imagined herself doing. Without rancor or malice, as one friend to another.

"I see," he kept saying. "I see!" Summoning his forces. Coördinating his weapons of defense. "We've nothing in common, eh! What about Doris? We'd share her, I suppose—six months with you and six with me!"

"Well—she's all right where she is, Dudley."

"Oh! I'm to be deprived of her too!"

"She'd be just as much yours as she is now."

"Nothing doing!" He knew from her voice that there lay her weakness. "If you want a divorce—all right—but I get the kid. Get that straight. I'm no door-

mat you can walk over or an old coat you can chuck aside because you're tired of it. I've done what I could for you—and her. I've given in to you in everything—your working, the kid farmed out with your people. What the hell do you think I am—a dummy! What the hell do you think marriage is—a joke!"

The thought of losing her stung him to fury. He remembered that lonely week when he had tried to do without her. Even in his rage he saw her beautiful, precious, unduplicable.

"And I'll tell you this." Tears trembled through his words. "I'll tell you this, Jean." Tears washed away his anger. "Even if you've stopped caring for me, I still love you. Love you, d'you hear."

He moved to the dressing-table where she sat and threw himself on his knees before her. His naked arms held her in a despairful embrace.

"Don't leave me, Jean. For God's sake don't leave me."

She felt his tears through her nightgown, but she sat there quiet, unyielding. She wanted to despise him for his weakness. It was just weakness! But the Dudley she wanted to be free of, the Dudley who was boring and prejudiced and narrow, didn't seem to be there. Only the boy she used to love so very tenderly was there. He only prevailed.

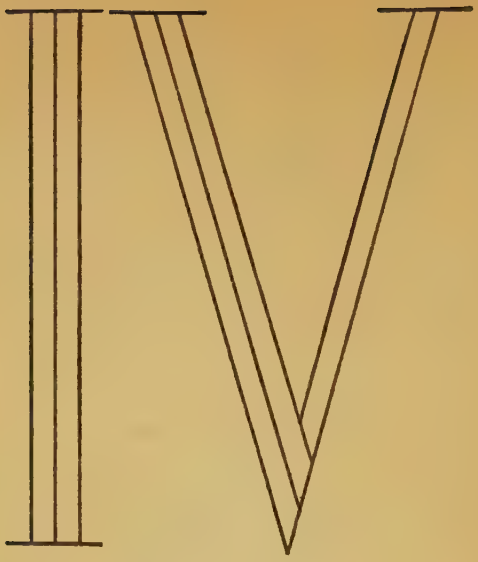
He looked up at her through those tilted eyes, drowned boy's eyes they were now, and he asked piteously: "Don't you love me—a little?"

"I'm fond of you," she answered dully.

He closed his eyes and winced; his head dropped down on her lap again.

They stayed like that, silent, for a long time. Both sad. Both beaten.

In the morning she searched in the desk and gave him the lease to sign.



Almost a year went by.

Dana Brent, a young aspirant to dramatic fame, phoned Jean excitedly one morning to say that an angel had dropped from the skies and was going to back his play.

He'd run across him yesterday. Happened to have a copy of the play with him. Gave it to him. He'd read it. Thought it was great. Everything was set. Would she please hop a taxi and come right up! His place. Name was Marsh, Justin Marsh. The greatest guy in the world!

The news didn't thrill Jean in the least, but there was

no use trying to argue with Brent over the phone. He was far too excited.

So she did as he said—hopped a taxi, and twenty minutes later she was ushered into a beautiful room and into the hallowed presence of the angel.

They both surprised her a little.

The room because of the incongruity of its furnishings. There were fine rare pieces with the veneer of centuries, dim tender-colored tapestries, old silver and paintings—English, Flemish, Spanish. And there were modern things, very modern things. A figure in silver by Archipenko, paintings by Davies and Simkhovitch.

The reason that he surprised her was not so definable. Somewhere in the thirties, she guessed him to be; certainly not good-looking. Dark, rugged, impelling. Wall Street, perhaps; or politics. Live, quick, intelligent. Maybe that was it. Brent's play wasn't up to him.

They talked about the play at lunch, and Jean wished herself a thousand miles away.

To Marsh's query as to what she thought of it, she didn't know what to reply. She was Brent's agent. Her business, her duty even, was to market his wares, and if she expressed her honest opinion of "Nightshade" Marsh wouldn't be so eager to put up twenty thousand dollars to produce it.

It had been the rounds of managers' offices without arousing a glimmer of interest. That didn't prove it wasn't any good, of course. It had one or two fine scenes, and the main idea was dramatic enough, but it lacked what Brent couldn't give it—craftsmanship.

Two or three more plays under his belt and he might turn out a good one.

To add to her embarrassment, she found that Brent, in his enthusiasm, had praised her inordinately to Marsh and had gone so far as to say that all Marsh had to do was to put up the money. They—he and Jean—would do the rest. Find the right producer, look after things generally.

Marsh was ready to write out a check there and then. Jean thought he'd better see the contract first. She'd draw up an agreement.

She hurried through her lunch, continually glancing at her watch, pleading an important engagement at the office.

Dana Brent went with her. She was furious with him.

"You utter young fool!" she exploded, as soon as they were alone. "Do you think I'm going to help you extract that amount of money from a man who knows nothing about the theater just to appease your vanity? I'm an agent; not a bandit."

"What's crooked about that? He likes the play and so do I—even if you don't. Lots of plays that agents and producers don't like turn out to be hits." He cited instances.

"It's your play, Dana—and your friend's money. But count me out!"

"You don't imagine I'm going to let a chance like that get away from me, do you?" he demanded angrily.

"You can do as you please."

"Well, you'll at least draw up the agreement?"

"Not on your life!"

"You're damned unsporting, Jean."

That made her laugh.

He left her in a rage, but in an hour he was back again—in a different frame of mind.

"I guess you're right," he said ruefully. "If the play's as bad as all that, it wouldn't be shooting fair. I don't blame you for getting sore with me."

On the other hand, she would admit, angels didn't drop from the skies every day, and if he promised to let her sit in final judgment—he'd sign a contract to that effect—would she go ahead with the deal? In the event that he didn't make the play in her opinion worth the risk Marsh was taking, she could return the money.

"Why not make the play right first?" she asked him.

"Because Marsh might be in the African jungle by then."

"What is he—an explorer?"

"No. He's nothing. And he never knows what he's going to do next or where he's apt to be."

Jean thought it over. And agreed on the condition that Marsh should be told the exact situation.

"All right," Brent gave in reluctantly. "You tell him."

She was sure in her own mind that the play would never be produced, but young Brent had talent. So she drew the agreement—a sheer waste of effort—and a few days later took it up to Marsh's apartment.

Extricated from an untenable position, and with no young firebrand of an author to embarrass her, she was able to enjoy the angel and his rather extraordinary heaven. An array of books, clean and uncut, baffled her. Keats and Jeffers; novels from Edgar Wal-

lace to Proust; "Roped Square and Rosin" by an erstwhile fight champion; a rare pornographic work on ancient love-rituals; and innumerable books on art, archeology, and aviation.

He came in while she was still examining them.

"I found there wasn't a thing in the house I hadn't read," he said, "so I went out yesterday on a book-buying jag."

"A bit varied," Jean observed.

"A developed characteristic," he told her drily. "Sit down. There's some tea coming. Brent's a nice kid, isn't he? Glad I ran across him the other day. Hope his play makes a million."

"It won't," she remarked.

"No?" He seemed surprised. "You don't think much of it then!"

"Well, you read it. What do you think—honestly?"

He looked at her and smiled. "Honestly," he returned, "I didn't read it."

"What!" Was he mad, this man, to back a play he hadn't even read with twenty thousand dollars?

"Can't read plays," he explained. "Never could. Not even Shakespeare. Something about the form disturbs me. The names of the characters and then what they say. You know: Sybil (archly, crossing R to fireplace): Oh, do sit down, Mr. Trimwell."

"Then it's purely—friendship?"

"A debt, let's say. Once there was a war, oh, many years ago when you were a little tot with bare knees and hair-ribbons—something to do with Belgium being invaded. Nobody seems to be quite sure now

what it was all about. But there was a war. One day in a certain now historical wood, I got hit with a bit of shrapnel. Right in the tummy. Brent's father—I didn't know he was a father—tried to carry me to a dressing-station. He wasn't any bigger than Dana and I was pretty husky even then. The result was that he burst a blood-vessel in his head and that was the end of him. I don't know if he actually saved my life, but he certainly lost his. Besides which the poor devil was deprived of dying by the hand of the enemy. In a war that means something. So, good or bad, read or unread, if young Brent wants his play produced the money is his! Sentiment if you will," he concluded with a smile, "but not insanity! Agreed?"

"More than agreed! I only wish I'd known about it the other day."

"What difference would it have made?"

"It would have saved me a most unpleasant hour—here, and a row with Dana afterwards." She told him the whole story.

Tea was served.

The room and the man lost their extraordinariness. A figure emerged from that incongruous miscellany of inanimate chairs and pictures and books that charmed and fascinated her. Despite his talk that revealed him, he tried without knowing it to hide himself from her. Once in a while he caught himself at it and grew silent.

Brent and his play were left in the distance. The agreement was signed and the check for that huge amount already forgotten in her pocket-book.

"By the way," he said, when she was finally on her way out, "is it Miss Hurd or is the 'Miss'—professional?"

"It's—professional," she returned.

"Does that preclude my seeing you again—unprofessionally?"

"Why, no, not at all."

"Tell me one thing more. Do you like fights?"

"Prize-fights? Well, I'm not exactly a fan."

"That's fine. I mean, that you like them. You've probably got an engagement tonight, but break it and come to a fight with me. A young protégé of mine—the Pride of Duluth—is making his début into what he calls the big money. I gave him his first boxing-lesson when he was ten. It'll be a good scrap and, as a special inducement, I'll introduce you to him afterwards—if there's anything left of him. Will you?"

His eyes coaxed her to say yes. When she hesitated, he led her by the hand to the telephone.

"I'd ask your husband too," he said, laughing, "but I don't know him!"

They dined there rather hurriedly, because he said the arena was quite far away. He phoned for his car. He insisted upon taking along a huge fur coat—in case she was cold.

"But it's hot tonight," she protested.

"Yes, I know," he said, "but I've been keeping a secret from you. Now if you change your mind I've at least had you for dinner. The fight is in Philadelphia—*but* —and I'm not boasting—I'm a first-class A number one pilot!"

She looked at him and laughed.

"You're mad, Justin Marsh—quite, quite mad!"

"I know it," he grinned, "but I'm a hell of a good pilot!"

II

The greatest lure to flying, she decided as Marsh helped her into the cockpit, at least so far as women were concerned, was the soft fur-lined helmet you wore. No hat was ever so irresistible.

It wasn't yet dark. One or two bright stars shone through the graying twilight. She was a little frightened until the plane took off. She had been up before in big tri-motored closed-in planes. And in the daytime. But Marsh's plane was tiny and fragile-looking. High up it would look like a bird. And it didn't seem possible that those thin wires and delicately wrought wings and struts or whatever they were called would withstand for a minute the pressure of the wind.

But when it roared off the ground and up into the air, her fear left her. She felt solid and secure.

Over the airdrome, up and up and away, climbing, climbing a hill of air, with below them the city bedecking herself in thin ribbons of lights. There would be where she lived, about there the office. Times Square, a triangle. Broadway, a diagonal jewel.

Already they had left it, and now if they fell they would drop into the river. Boats looked like lozenges, docks and piers like a bit of cardboard that a child had cut out to play an invented game with.

Haze and the gathering darkness that seemed to come from the earth to envelop them. Lights in the

distance radiating from a center like a star. On and on with the roar of the engine that seemed in some way to be connected with your heart.

Then a long span of time. Or was it space? No, time. A long span when she ceased to look down into the darkness for lights that were towns, when she ceased thinking almost, and with very little effort she could have dozed off to sleep.

Her brain felt a bit numb, her eyes drowsy. The hum of the motor was monotonous. It was too forceful, too insistent; it overpowered one's consciousness.

At last downward, downward like a bird headed straight into the heart of a radiance.

"Well," he demanded, when she clambered out, "am I or am I not a first-class A number one pilot?"

"You are," she assured him. "I'd fly with you anywhere!"

"Don't say things you don't mean!" He helped her off with her coat and threw it into the plane. "I know you hate to give up that helmet, but it's time for a hat again."

They taxied to the arena. It seemed much more perilous than flying. He assured her it was.

"At least when you're in the air things don't run into you," he said.

"As long as you stay in the air!" she retorted.

The fights were on. They made their way down a steep incline to two seats in the second row. The few fights Jean had to her credit had been viewed from the balcony. She thought she'd rather be there now.

One of the fighters was a bit bloody, and it was only the second round.

Because they were there to see Tim Ferris, the Pride of Duluth, the other contests seemed tiresome. Or maybe the speed of the air was still in their veins and everything by comparison was tame.

Yet, their hearts quickened and they were excited at once when their man climbed into the ring. Jean felt she knew him personally and well. His winning was a matter of vital importance.

Tim saw Marsh and grinned.

This was his hour. He stood on the threshold of his dreams. The brawn and the strength of his twenty summers would lend him the last ounce of their substance. All of him was what had come out of a thought when Marsh had first taught him to parry and hit, perhaps. All of him lived in the quickness of his eye, the courage in his heart, leashed now as he sprawled with his legs stretched out white under the arcs.

The gong rang his knell.

His opponent was Mike Morgan who had once come within an ace of the crown. A year past his peak and on the decline, but dangerous and sly with ringcraft.

In the fourth round Mike nailed him with a right, drove him into the ropes and hammered him unmercifully. In the fifth round Tim won. He had to win. He was a demon of fury. Mike's strength ebbed and Tim beat him into insensibility.

He was a hero; a topnotcher, a contender now for the title.

Marsh and Jean saw him presently in a room off the

dressing-cubicles, a room filled with fighters and managers and the stench of embrocation and sweat, smoke and rough words.

"Sit down," Marsh said, dragging a battered chair into a corner by the door. "Women aren't supposed to come in here. They're fixing him up, I guess."

Jean recognized him by his grin. He was so small and insignificant in his clothes.

"Pleased to know you, ma'am," he said, giving her a hand that was hot and trembling. "Well, what d'you say, Mr. Marsh? Glad you was out there tonight. Made me feel pretty happy. Pretty good, huh?"

"Fair, Tim, fair."

"What d'you mean fair? Didn't I knock him cold? Jeeze, lady," he appealed to Jean, "nothin' ever satisfies this guy! What d'you mean—fair!"

"That fourth round, Tim. It was awful."

"But I'm talkin' 'bout the fifth round. Wasn't you there for the fifth round? Did you fall asleep or somethin'? Jeeze!" He appealed again to Jean.

"That fourth round," Marsh persisted, "was pitiful. You'll never make the grade, Tim, if you don't learn to box. Why, you took enough punishment in that one round to do you for twenty fights. Take a look at that map of yours."

"Aw—I ain't no Carpenteer."

"Nor Benny Leonard either. He hasn't got a mark on him. When you're his age you'll be goofy. You'll be goofy in two years. All you'll be fit for is the farm." He shook his hand. "See you in New York. Call me up. Glad you won."

They taxied back to the field.

"You weren't very kind to him," Jean remarked as they drove.

"Wasn't I? I thought I was . . . I've got a soft spot in my heart for that kid and he knows it."

"You could have praised him a bit more. After all, he did win."

"Of course he won. He's one of the cleverest boxers in the country. But I want him to win the title."

They put on coats and helmets again, clambered into the cockpit. The plane roared down the field, and zoomed off the earth into dark cold space.

Her head ached a little from excitement. Again the noise of the motor deafened her, and the wind made her crouch low in her confining nest.

But presently she knew only a gigantic loneliness, a loneliness too awesome for the human mind to bear. Only half-a-mile below them was the earth. Six or seven feet away from her was Marsh.

She wanted suddenly most dreadfully to hear his voice. She shouted at him with all her might—"Marsh! Justin! Justin!" She felt mad, lost, frenzied in that moment.

Then it passed and she let the huge loneliness envelop her. A new world, a new ether, and a fathomless peace.

The arena, Tim Ferris, the dressing-room with its stench of sweat and embrocation, seemed hours—nay, weeks—away. She saw Tim clearly, small and insignificant in his natty suit and cap pulled crooked over one swollen eye. Would he go home to his mother and tell

her all about the fight? She'd get him to bed and put pieces of raw beef on his hurts. He was a big man now in his world. The girls would try to marry him. One would succeed and be proudly Mrs. Tim Ferris.

Little worlds, little worlds overlapping and barging into other little worlds. Each so big to itself, so rangeless in pain and delight!

Her own world for instance. Marsh's world. Speeding through time they had verged and touched. What for? And for how long? Perhaps for only today. Presently she'd forget him and content herself with—Doris.

Doris would grow up with planes. The air would become part of her consciousness. She'd move faster and hence live faster. That meant multiplied experiences. Speed was the secret then.

In the span of ten years Doris, from twenty to thirty, might be able to encompass the experience and knowledge that scarcely could be crowded into two lifetimes now.

And the breed, adapting itself to the change, would one day be born air-minded, equipped with broader faculties to soar through this night loneliness, to soar round the world grown smaller and smaller through speed.

III

They verged swiftly towards a relationship of love. A few meetings. A few evenings together. Two or three weeks.

His mind fascinated her; his way of life seemed enchanting. If she were a man she'd want to be like him;

even look like him, not handsome, but rugged of build, dark-eyed, a brow inclined towards the arts, a chin contradicting it, and a mouth cynical, whimsical, sensual.

But what she liked most about him was his spirit; it was kin to hers. It was that that had provided him with the sinews of life, money and independence; not just luck, as he insisted. If he hadn't grown rich from oil, he would have made it in something else. Not that he was really rich. He could have been if he had continued at it, but with a comparatively modest sum he quit and for the past six or seven years he had, as Dana Brent said, done nothing.

"Just loafed," he told her one evening as they sat in that pleasant room of his after dinner. "Moved around quite a bit. Started enterprises here and there. Nothing big. Generally with some friend who had the idea and needed backing. Some of them turned out to be money-makers. One of them, a new kind of motor I played around with in Germany, has paid for all my failures."

Just loafed—to live! And living was exploring, delving into things to learn what significance they had, what relation their significance bore to the general pattern of progress.

That lay at the bottom of his passion for aviation and accounted no doubt for his worshipful regard of Lindbergh. He actually envied him. To fly the Atlantic, to fly it alone, had been his dream too. At the time he had been experimenting with planes for some two years. When Lindbergh succeeded the goal was made. The incentive was gone.

But now that no one else had equaled the performance the idea was tempting him again. He'd find out for himself at least what measure luck had contributed to that unparalleled feat.

Progress, knowledge, growth, speed. That was what counted for him. And hence he believed in this age. He loved it. History revealed nothing that even remotely approached it. Why everybody couldn't agree on that one point he couldn't understand.

"You agree with me about that," he said. "But even you aren't sure."

"Yes, I am," she returned. "The more I see of it, the surer I am."

A few evenings. Two or three weeks. And what hadn't they touched upon, and come close in the communion of understanding? Only love—and Dudley. Both lay in the forest of their penetration, sooner or later to be uncovered and encountered. The one glimmering golden and red, the other nebulous and dark. But both now stalked the flow of their minds and narrowed the confines of their journeying.

Jean didn't see him for a few days. Love was too painful. Visioned in the abstract it was the pot of gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow, but when it took form and threatened to close its hands over your heart then you knew it would hurt.

But already it was too late.

Marsh couldn't know that of course. He knew only his side of it. He dealt with it after his fashion.

"You and I seem to look at life from much the same angle," he said. (She had come to dine with him once

more.) "It isn't a common angle. I wonder if you're going to understand me now."

She sensed what it was, although he had given no hint of it in his manner at dinner. He had never in the many hours they had passed alone betrayed his feeling for her other than in seeking her society, in sharing his thoughts with her. He had never touched her. His behavior was as impersonal as the first time they had met.

It was the same now. He sat in his favorite chair and looked at her across a little distance.

"It's about us. You probably guessed as much." His voice was quite cool. "I'm no good at wooing a woman. Paying her court. You know what I mean—pretty speeches—soft looks—flowers with a few careful words —all the leading-up business to conquest. The idea has always struck me as—well, funny. It makes me laugh. It's like grown-ups dressing up in feathers and pretending they're Indians. The woman must know that he isn't really the immaculate barbered banner of chivalry he pretends to be; and she must have a fairly good idea of what she intends to do about it ultimately. Maybe I'm cynical. I like to think it's because love is more precious to me, more to be respected." He flicked the ash from his cigarette and moved to the sofa where she nestled. "You're probably smiling at me, Jean—and wondering why I don't make love to you, if I really think I'm in love with you."

"I'm not smiling, Justin."

"Then I'll go on. I'm not in love with you. But we've given each other much of ourselves—in friendship.

You wouldn't have given me that much—or I you—unless we had love to give, love rather we wanted to give."

"Had to give," she preferred.

"Then you see what I mean."

"I've been fair, Justin," she said quietly.

"You couldn't not be, I'm afraid. It's I who am not being fair, perhaps. But I want you now. I want you fearfully. It isn't," he confessed candidly, "that I couldn't go on longer the other way. It's that I don't want to."

"You could forget me now."

He nodded. "Yes."

"If you were in love, you couldn't."

"No doubt."

She watched the smoke from her cigarette curl under the rim of a lamp-shade. A sweet peace stole over her. It brought a little sigh to her lips, and made her put her hand in his.

"I'm in love with you, Justin."

He pressed her hand in his. He kissed it.

"I'll try to be decent, Jean."

Then he got up and moved away from her. He drew the curtain of a window aside and stood looking down into the street.

A strange afraidness held him; heavy and saddening it seemed to sweep into him on the wings of dead years. A medley of faces and forms and hands and perfumes and places rose before his eyes in a phantasmagoric confusion, and vanished. Many, many women and two loves. From the loves he had learned nothing.

Only that love could be. From the women he had learned what he knew. "I'm in love with you, Justin." "I'm in love with you, Justin." The sweet voice trembled into his very soul. The afraidness grew horribly acute and then drifted out of him.

"Justin!"

He went back and sat beside her on the sofa.

"Justin—what were you thinking?"

Tenderly, grimly he smiled. "I scarcely know myself," he replied. "I was suddenly afraid—for you, I think."

Her hands patted his face and crept around his neck. Their lips closed in a kiss. Breathless they drew apart, looked in each other's eyes, and kissing yielded to a little storm of ardor and embraces. Then they laughed because they were youngsters suddenly—she eighteen or so and he twenty-one; and the tension and fears of the past few days were dissipated.

So they laughed and were silent. They sat close, for a spell, hand tight in hand. "I'm in love with you, Justin." The phrase still trembled about him. So honest. No playing with him, no flirting or bargaining.

His heart held her in homage. His heart blessed her.

Presently she told him about Dudley. She found it easy to say:

"I don't love him, Justin. I haven't for quite a long time."

"You're sure, Jean—you're sure?" He was alarmed at first. What if this were fascination! He wished he had made her tell him before. The bonds of marriage were sometimes subtle. To him mysterious because they

had never bound him. "This isn't breaking things that are precious to you?"

"No, dear—no. There isn't anything to break. Don't look so worried, dear!" It made her smile. One minute appealing to her highest intelligence, the next minute treating her like a child! Now after she had given him herself—in spirit, certainly—unless she made it crystal clear to him, he'd take her by the hand and lead her back home!

The beast in a man vanished quite away sometimes.

IV

"Going to Willow Gardens?" Dudley enquired, as he watched her packing a bag.

It was the following day, a Saturday.

"No, I'm not," she replied without looking up.

"Well, I'm going up to the game. Yanks and Athletics. Said I'd meet Geof up there. I may go on out with him for supper and stay the night. Did you say you're not going to your mother's?"

"I'm going somewhere else."

"A secret?"

"No. I'm going," she said evenly, "for the week-end with some one I'm in love with."

He looked at her and laughed. "Well, have a good time! I may run down tomorrow sometime. If not, I'll see you Monday."

"Monday," she heard herself echo, torn between calling him back and not calling. The slam of the front-door decided the issue for her. It was just as well. His

week-end and hers would be the better for it. And Monday would come fast enough. She hadn't tried to make her voice light in order to deceive him. Or had she, unconsciously? Well, it didn't matter. If he had taken her at her word she would have had it out with him then.

She met Justin. They went by plane to an old farm near Saratoga that had been left him by an uncle who had bred race-horses. Several quite famous ones, Justin said. As a boy he used to spend an occasional summer there. It had teemed with life then. Now there was nothing. Just the farmhouse and barns and fields.

Inside it was enchanting.

"Not bad," Justin admitted. He had left everything just as it had been. "I've always meant to fix it up a bit. Now maybe I will—if you like it."

"It's adorable, Justin." She stood looking around at the quaint old things. "It's like jumping back into the middle of last century."

"Farther back than that!"

The life of that other age seemed to re-create itself before her eyes, an age of graces and manners, hardship and simplicity. She wondered if Justin's uncle had brought a bride there. She saw her in crinolines, decorous and shy, looking about her just as she was looking about now. Life was different then. Love was different. She must have said to herself: "This is my home now. This is where I'll always be." A carriage took her into town ten or twelve miles away. Neighbors rather distant. In winter she was snowed in. Some-

times for weeks on end. Was she lonely then, sad? Did she yearn for—excitement, and grow to hate it all? Even hate him a little?

She examined some old photographs in black oval frames that hung over the fireplace. That one was she!

"Aunt Myrtle," Justin said. "Here's another one of her when she was younger. She and the old boy died within a week of one another. Always wanted kids. Kept on hoping even after she was fifty."

Yes, the eyes were sad. Something haunting them.

"Were they happy?" she asked.

"Yes, they were,"—thinking back of how he remembered them. "His name was Leander. Leander and Myrtle. Yes, they were happy. But life was different then!"

"Was love different too—then?"

"Maybe it was."

"Oh, Justin—love was never different!"

"No, I suppose not," he admitted. "It's the attitude we bring to it that changes. Besides, we know more."

"Or less?" she queried.

"What do you think?" He smiled down at her, his arms drawing her close. He kissed her mouth so that she couldn't answer at once.

"I think," she said, "I'm very glad I'm here."

It was September now. The fields were painted in yellows. The trees in the orchard were laden to the ground with fruit. To the west there was a river that wound blue and silver through the goldenrod. Beyond, over a brownish hill, a woodland threw spikes of pine-tops into the red-streaked sunset. The wind

blew in gusts, hurrying the clouds across the still-summer sky; it died away and nothing seemed to stir.

Constantly Jean thought of Myrtle.

Sunday melted away. And it was night again.

They got up at dawn the next morning, and took off, the wings of the plane glistening wet with dew. The country still slept. Night was her lover, she thought; he left her replenished.

She felt that vast loneliness again, heavy and saddening. She remembered Myrtle whose whole world was encompassed by a few fields and by the seasons of the year. It was sad she was barren and wanted children: sadder than it would be now.

Life was different then. But love wasn't! He'd said: "It's the attitude we bring to it that changes."

That brought Dudley to mind (he had scarcely come to her mind up there) and she wondered how he'd take her news. She was glad she hadn't told him on Saturday. She'd have brought the shadow of it to the farm.

They landed on a flying-field not far from Willow Gardens. They said good-by and Marsh took off again to fly the plane back to the field where he kept it. Jean watched it circle and climb, higher and higher, until it was a paper-fragile toy in the sky. It made her shiver a little.

It wasn't yet eight o'clock when she opened the nursery door. Doris was bathed and hungry and in no mood to be hugged and kissed. Alice came in and she stopped crying instantly, her eyes intent upon her breakfast.

Jean went into town with her father. She enquired on the way if Dudley had come out yesterday.

"No," he said, "but I think your mother said he phoned. Where were you?"

"Oh, I had to go somewhere else." She realized, as she evaded his query, how difficult it was going to be to tell them; how hopeless it was to expect them to understand her point of view. He would take it philosophically; dismiss it theosophically. Each had his way to choose! But her mother would be unhappy about it. It would be shameful, wicked, in her eyes. "Think of Doris," she'd say. "Think what it'll mean to her later on! If you loved her, Jean, you couldn't!"

She remembered again that phrase of Marsh's: "It's the attitude we bring to it that changes." Were they wrong, she and Justin?—their way of thought, their way of life? Self or the abnegation of self? Everything hung upon that single thread.

The day was irksome. Dudley thrust himself between her and everything. He loomed bigger and bigger, and all the world seemed to be at his back eager to bring up the cohorts of a traditional morality in support. She found herself fighting against a false sense of shame.

He came in unsuspecting of course. Her trunk in the living-room, open and half-packed, roused those old fears and made him think of Kitty Frazer rather than what Jean had said on Saturday in jest. But he had broken with Kitty. Or she had broken with him. He hadn't had anything to do with her all summer.

"What's the idea?" he asked bluntly.

She told him. She hadn't meant to deceive him but what she had said on Saturday—about being in love with some one and going away—was true.

"You went away—with some one!" He couldn't believe it. Jean, his wife, had spent the week-end with some man! "Who?" he suddenly shouted at her.

"Justin Marsh. I don't think you know him."

He stared at her stupidly. He wanted to go on shouting at her but he was too dumbfounded to find words to shout. She was in love with some one else! Slept with him! Been with him all the week-end while he had been fooling around with Geof, kidding and laughing and having a few drinks! There was something crazy about it. And she'd told him. Well, of course he had laughed. Christ!

"Have you gone crazy?" He snatched a dress out of her hand and threw it down. He still couldn't believe that she'd been unfaithful to him. Something in him kept rejecting it.

"I don't see," she said quietly, "why you're so surprised. You've known for a long time how I've felt about you. I told you, Dudley. You remember. I wanted to go—oh, a year ago."

Her coolness exasperated him.

"How long have you known this—Marsh?"

"Not very long."

"And you just went off with him—as though it were nothing!" He was beginning to believe it now. A dark wall, alienating them, was rising up through the fog. The sight of the trunk smote him terribly. It shouldn't. Of course she was going now. He'd damn' well kick

her out if she didn't. It was the other thing that was so awful. The adultery.

"I'm sorry," she said sympathetically, "for your sake, Dudley. But I couldn't do anything else—believing as I do."

"Believing what?"

"What I believe about—conduct. There's no use discussing it. We'd never agree. We never have. But I'm going because under the circumstances—no matter how much you cared—I couldn't stay here."

"Oh, I see," he murmured inarticulately. "The same old story! I shouldn't be surprised, you're right! Do as you please and send the whole wide world to the devil. Me and the kid and marriage and promises—everything! To hell with everything, so long as you get what you want! If that's conduct, I'll be God-damned!"

She didn't defend herself. She expected him to rail like this against her; his point of view was obvious, and it wasn't his fault if he couldn't see hers. The pity of it was that once they were lovers. Now he was reviling her, hating her. Was love nothing but a base illusion? She tried not to listen. He was reviling her with words, with words blackened in the fire of temper and frustration. And of ignorance.

"Please, Dudley, stop it!"

But for once he had found his tongue. He went back over the years of their marriage, finding instance upon instance to prove her false and selfish and considerate of no one but herself. She had ruined his life, smashed up his home, sent his kid away, because she wanted money and excitement. Because she wanted to amuse

herself with a bunch of degenerates. A bunch of rats. And now they'd succeeded in making her a rat. Like Olive O'Doone, who'd take on anything from a nigger to a Chinaman. *She* believed in conduct too, no doubt!

His vilification knew no bounds; he branded her treacherous and vile. The realization, now stark in his consciousness, that another man had had her maddened him to violence. He flew at her, knocking over the trunk, and held her in a grip of steel. His hands went to her throat but she struck them away.

"Because I don't love you!" she said contemptuously. "I'm vile and treacherous! I'm a whore because I don't love you! I was a whore, Dudley. Every night this last year that I let you touch me I was a whore! Now I'm clean—clean in my own heart—and that's all I care about. I was in love with you, and then marriage or no marriage, you could have had me."

"I remember," he cut in, shouting her down, "but I didn't take you, did I? I could have had you all right, but I thought too much of you, loved you too much!"

"Because I believed in love," she blazed back at him. "That's why. That's why. I believed in it even then. Now I believe in it a thousand times more. Love—love—not marriage or duty or promises—but what it was I had in my heart for you and what I have now for Marsh."

"Oh," he said weakly, dumbly, "I see!"

"I wish to God you did!" she retorted tearfully. "Then there wouldn't be hatred—and lies."

But his eyes had fallen on the trunk again. He ought to go and pick it up.

"Love!" he sneered. "Christ!"

The telephone rang. From her voice he knew it was Marsh.

"I'm still packing," Dudley heard her saying, no trace of anger or bitterness in her voice. "I'll be along presently. I'll phone you from the hotel."

It drove him out. He grabbed up his hat and went.

V

The change she had wrought in her life had come about so logically, so honestly, that what she had done did not seem in the least surprising or daring. But evidently it was.

Merrie said: "Good Lord! You mean to say you're *living* with this other man!"

"Well, we each have our own apartment."

"Oh!" he said as though maintaining separate establishments helped a little. "I'm surprised though, I must say. I didn't think you were so—Bohemian! What's Dudley going to do?"

Always that. What's Dudley going to do? And then:

"I suppose you'll marry this Mr. Marsh—when you can."

Elinor was the same.

"But you're going to marry him sometime, Jean?"

"I don't know if I want to marry him, Elinor. We've never talked about it. Never."

"Didn't he say he wanted to marry you—ever?"

"We've never discussed marriage, I tell you."

"And you're going to live together—openly? You won't care what people say?" She looked at her as if

she were a new person, a Jean she didn't know. "It's very admirable," she went on, with that same note of distress in her voice, "to go ahead like that—and not care, but I couldn't, Jean. It isn't like having a home, is it?—knowing what to expect and all that? What I mean, Jean, is that it isn't the same as the other—you know—Dudley, is it? You had hopes then—and plans—and, well, it was going to be forever and ever even if it didn't turn out that way. This—the way you tell it—is just an affair, isn't it? Maybe that's all you want it to be. Temporary. You know. But—you won't mind my saying this, dear—I never thought you'd want affairs. Honestly, Jean. It does sort of surprise me. I just can't seem to think of you like that somehow."

The old Jean was gone forever, the good tender loving Jean. It made her want to cry. She'd never be able to be close or confiding to this new person.

Sylvia was shocked; but that was to be expected.

"It's one thing, talking about doing such things," she said, honestly enough, "but putting them in practice, Jean, is really dreadful." It brought Josie Montague to mind. "I can't believe it. You couldn't do it here in Willow Gardens, I'll tell you that. The neighbors would complain. I do hope you won't tell them. It'd make it most embarrassing for all of us. And you won't bring him out, will you? I really wouldn't know what to say to him." She looked at her strangely too, as though this couldn't be her daughter.

New York nineteen-thirty! Jean thought cynically. New York with its fine modernness, with its speed and its skyscrapers thrown up to heaven in glory of a

new age and a new intelligence, and yet still dwarfed and choked by that old worn-out idea! Not—were you honest? were you clean? were you to be trusted? That didn't matter much. But—who did you sleep with? Ah, that mattered! That told the whole story. That, your most intimate relationship, must be kept plainly on view. Upon it you were labeled, classified, judged!

But she laughed. She could afford to laugh. She had her happiness. She was at the summit of her hill. And if she didn't like to look back at the road she had climbed, it was because it hurt her to think that Dudley was unhappy. Unhappy because of her.

Despite everything, she was fond of him. Tender-hearted towards him. The more so because of her own high content.

Occasionally she saw him at Willow Gardens. But when she came, he left. He wouldn't speak to her above the exchange of the barest civilities.

"Hello, how are you?"

Once his love, still legally his wife; now his enemy!

She followed him out to his car one Saturday afternoon as he was hurrying away because she had come.

"Wouldn't it be better," she suggested, "if we were free of each other?"

"Free? A divorce, you mean?"

"Well—yes."

"So you can marry him!"

"Suppose I did want to?"

"Who's going to pay for it—him?"

"Of course not, Dudley. Don't be so absurd."

"Well, I'm not going to all that expense—for noth-

ing. If you want to divorce me you can try it, but you'll have a hell of a time getting it." He slammed the door of his car and drove off.

The months swung happily by in a whirl of activity. The business showed signs of becoming really prosperous. The theatrical end of things opened up new avenues of interest and profit. Already there were chances to anticipate in productions. Later on they'd be able to take advantage of them. Keats had his periods of drinking. Sometimes he'd stop altogether. But he was content to be the power of their bark—the engine down below as he used to think of himself—and leave the helm to her. Elinor and Alan did the stoking. There was need already for other pairs of eyes, other brains; there was need for larger quarters.

Away from the office there were Doris and Justin, who shared her heart and her evenings and week-ends. And because Justin was Justin neither conflicted with the other.

She had her life, had she? Great! Well, he had his! Interests everywhere. Not only financial ones. He was off hunting in Canada. In Chicago for two days on business. An air-meet took him west. A racing car out to beat the world's record took him south.

Life was a jewel of a thousand facets. Love was its crown.

He came. Life was poignant and glamorous. When would he come again? Tomorrow perhaps. After three tomorrows. But in her arms or away he loved her. Tonight love, just love, might bring him back.

"What is it—love?" she asked.

"If I knew I would tell you."

"Sometimes it frightens me so, Justin. If I knew what it was—"

"—we'd be gods, darling. We're gods when we have it. That's enough. To know what *isn't* it is the closest you'll get. You know that now. Not many of us ever know that much."

Yes, she knew what wasn't love.

In February Doris had a birthday. She was too young to know that she was two. But there'd be a cake with three candles—one to wish on; and there'd be some other kiddies from the neighborhood.

Jean phoned Dudley to tell him, in case the date had slipped his mind.

"Thanks!" he said sarcastically. "I would forget that!" His laughter mocked her.

She paid no heed to it. "I thought perhaps you'd like me to buy her something for you. I could take it with me and then it would be there when you got out."

He hesitated. "All right," he said grudgingly, as though he were doing her the service, "if you want to. Thanks."

She went out early and stayed the whole afternoon. Dudley didn't get there till six. So that he wouldn't rush out on her account, she put on her things to go. She had to return to town anyway to go to the opening of a client's play.

"You going?" he said. "So am I." For the first time his manner was friendly, or as friendly as it might have been to a stranger. "Thanks for getting me the doll. How much was it?"

She told him the sum and he paid her.

For some reason it made them both laugh. Maybe because the ridiculous transaction over a five-dollar bill hurt somehow. But their laughter, no matter its cause, seemed to break through that alienating wall. Momentarily at least. Sufficiently for her to suggest that if he were going back to town he might drive her in.

"Oh, all right," he agreed. None too readily, of course. He'd oblige almost anybody with a lift back to town. He'd just as soon not, but as a favor—all right!

It was a silent, unpleasant journey. He had nothing to say to her, and didn't intend to make conversation just for the sake of talking. If she asked him a question he answered.

But it was difficult to think of safe questions to put to him. How are things going? Do you still go out to see Dot and Geof? I've been very unhappy about you, Dudley. Do you remember Doris' first birthday? Everything became a shaft aimed straight for that still raw wound. And to talk impersonally about current happenings reported in the newspaper was tantamount to saying: We're strangers now. Worse than strangers. That's all we'll ever be now.

Irksome, nerve-racking, even painful, but a long step, she felt, in the establishing of a new relationship. They had spent forty-five minutes alone together.

Gradually, gradually, when his pride was healed, when some one else came along to capture his interest perhaps, they could be warm enough friends to share

and enjoy equally and sometimes together that little life which was theirs. By the time she was old enough to understand the breach would be entirely mended. She wouldn't be deprived of either of them ever.

The first tiny rift in the clouds. Soon it would be fair.

VI

In the ensuing weeks she hoped for other opportunities, but none presented themselves and she made no effort to manufacture them. A rare and delicate growth of human relationship, it couldn't be artificially forced.

But apparently it didn't exist at all. Jean was mistaken.

She arrived at Willow Gardens one evening to find Sylvia and Alice in a frenzy of distress. They had tried to get hold of her at the office and at home. Dudley had taken Doris away!

Alice was on her way home with her when Dudley, who had driven out to see her, drew up at the curb. Doris had put her arms out to him.

"Want to go riding with Daddy?"

They were only a quarter of a mile from the house. Alice had given her to him out of her carriage, blankets and all so she wouldn't catch cold.

"Maybe I won't bring her back!" he had laughed to Alice. And to Doris: "Want to come and stay with Daddy?"

Alice had waved at Doris; Doris had waved back. Alice wheeled the empty baby-carriage home, thinking naturally that he would drive round the block a couple of times perhaps and be there ahead of her.

Upon arriving at the house and not seeing the car outside she waited on the driveway. Sylvia came along in her Ford, and they went in the house together.

Half-an-hour passed and they commenced to worry a little. Then an hour, and they were really alarmed, thinking he had met with an accident perhaps.

It was growing dark by now. They went out to look for him; one one way and one the other. Alice got back first. Truly frightened now, she stood again on the driveway waiting for Sylvia.

A telegraph boy hopped off his bicycle and brought her a wire for Mrs. Hurd.

They gave it to Jean to read.

"Please tell Jean that Doris is going to stay with me for a while."

The two women were in tears. Was he crazy? Where had he taken her? To his place in New York? What did he know about taking care of a child?

Jean read his telegram again. She felt suddenly weak and sick.

Back in town she went straight to his apartment where he had moved after she had left him. She rang the bell. She stood outside the door listening. When she got no response, she thought of his mother in Trenton, and hurried to a drugstore to telephone there.

Aunt Emily answered. She said Mrs. Crome wasn't in. Mr. Crome? Dudley Crome? No, he hadn't been out.

In an hour she called again. This time Mrs. Crome replied.

"Is Dudley there, Mrs. Crome?"

"Hold the wire."

After a while, Dudley's voice.

"Dudley! This is Jean. Is Doris there with you?"

"Yes, she is,"—on guard, succinctly.

"But—Dudley—"

"But Dudley what!"—harsh over the wire.

"You'd no right to take her—like that."

"No?" No right? *He* had no right?

It was useless to try to reason with him.

"I'll come out," she said weakly, and hung up.

Trenton—an hour and a half from New York. That cold little house cluttered with the paraphernalia of dress-making. Those worn anxious faces and gray voices sighing through their words. *She* wouldn't know the difference, bless her. She'd be asleep in one of the rooms upstairs.

What a fool he was to take her that distance! Had he driven all that way? He wouldn't have risked the cold. Probably took the train. "Please tell Jean that Doris is going to stay with me for a while." For a while! Did he mean a few days? Just to show her off to them.

They wouldn't want her longer. She'd be in the way. It was just a mad impulse born in a moment. "Want to come riding with Daddy?"

Dudley opened to her ring at once and followed her in to the parlor. Mrs. Crome was there, a little gray shadow, her face made of gray rags. She said "good evening" and disappeared as no doubt she had been told to do.

"Is Doris all right?"

"Perfectly all right," he replied briefly.

"You didn't drive down in the car?"

"I'm not a fool, Jean."

They looked at one another. Dudley lighted a cigarette—and waited; cold, imperturbable. He flung himself into a chair, politely leaving her the more comfortable sofa. Well, let's have it, his manner challenged her; I'm ready!

Fear, the crystallization of her worst fears, smothered the anger that blazed through her.

"Why did you do it, Dudley?" she asked quietly.

"Do what?" he retorted hotly. "She's as much mine as yours, isn't she? I can have her some of the time if I want to!"

"But—but here! It's so—far."

"Far? One hour by express. Willow Gardens forty minutes."

She didn't know how to proceed.

"How long," she came out with it, "do you want her to stay?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know. You had her for over a year."

Her heart went cold. That mean untidy little room! Those gray lifeless faces! Herself coming into the house, into that inimical atmosphere, braving the antipathy of them! Staying a short time. Visiting. Driven out by their quiet enmity. Hurrying through the streets to the train.

"Who's going to take care of her?" she demanded sharply.

"Well," he said with an air of inflexibility, "my mother knows *something* about kids. We may get a

nurse. It'll be the same here," he explained tolerantly, "as out there. You can come out whenever you want to. Stay overnight if you like. There's a room. The trip's a little longer but not much. The only difference is that she's with my mother instead of yours."

Again she was stopped, held by the horrible realization that nothing she said—argue, plead, rage, wheedle, weep—would avail her. This was his revenge.

He wasn't even hating her. He could afford not to hate her now. Let her do the hating! He could sit back sardonically amused, smoking quietly. And thoroughly within his rights!

"I'll go up and see her," she said shortly.

Doris was asleep in a small room adjoining Mrs. Crome's room. They had bought a new crib for her.

Jean stood looking down at her, fighting the tears. They came and choked her and she bit them back.

She was hers, hers! No one else's in all the world! And they'd stolen her. Taken her by force. And she was impotent to take her back.

Mad thoughts chased into mind. Downstairs was the door. She'd fight her way out. The police! She'd tell them they'd stolen her, kidnaped her. Ridiculous! They'd laugh when they heard the story.

She went downstairs again.

"Will you let Alice come out and take care of her?"

"No," he shook his head. "We'll get some one else. Don't worry!" he flared up again. "We're not a pack of damn' fools! We'll see she's as well taken care of here as she was out there!"

Perhaps if she pleaded, she thought again. Useless. His eyes, his whole manner, told her so. Better laugh. Then he might not fully realize the power of the weapon he wielded.

"Dudley," she said gravely, "I've never thought to rob you of Doris, not any part of her. She's just as much yours, as you say, as she is mine. You love her as much as I do. I'm sure you do. But there is a difference—I can't define it exactly—between a mother's feeling for her child and a father's feeling. At any rate when it's a baby and—helpless. Until she's older—say four or five—I want her with me because I'm her mother."

"Her mother," he retorted, "yes. You brought her into the world, if that's what you mean. But that's all the mother you've ever been to her. And you know it!"

"No, Dudley, you're wrong."

"I'm always wrong, Jean," he said cynically. "I'm just a sap to you. Just a doormat for you to walk over getting to some place else. You've had your way in everything, everything, without giving a good God-damn about any one. Now I'm going to have my way for once—just to see how it feels."

"You did it just to hurt *me* then!"

He shrugged. She could think that, if she liked!

"That's low of you, Dudley,"—her voice husky with sadness.

VII

Justin was away. She sent him a telegram that night, a brief wire penned in despair, saying, "Please come back at once"; and he was there the next morning ringing at her door before she was up.

"Come in, dear," she said, her tone allaying his fears. "Something rather awful has happened."

He saw in her eyes it was awful; a shaft like ice shivered into him. A look flashed between them, a fire fusing them, and she was in his arms sobbing, not even trying to tell him.

"I'm so glad you're here, Justin. I'm so glad you're here."

"My darling, my Jean! What's hurt you? What has hurt you so?"

"I'll tell you, Justin. I'll tell you."

She told him everything, even remembering what she had said. It wasn't until she was reaching the end that she realized what she was doing. His face betrayed him. It was cut out of ruddy-gray stone; the eyes were stone too.

"And then?" the lips moved, urging her on.

"Then—then,"—she might as well finish now—"then I went downstairs again. I asked him—as one human being might ask something of another human being—just asked him, Justin, to let me have her. Because, I said, because there's a difference between a mother's feeling and anybody else's feeling."

"And he said no!"

"He said I'd never been a mother to her."

She hurried on to the end. And then waited, frightened, not even looking at him.

Long seconds passed.

"Well," his voice rasped, "I'd go damn' far into hell too to get you back if I lost you."

"It's not that, Justin! It's not you!" She bent over him, her hands on his shoulders. "It's not, Justin!"

"Don't be a fool," he said harshly, meeting her eyes. "I took you away. Physically, I took you from him."

"I would have gone anyway."

"Some day. Perhaps never."

Her eyes still held his. "Even so—I'm not a whore." In his weakness she suddenly found strength. "And I'm not a coward either." Something, maybe those fire-lighted eyes, said: "Neither are you, Justin."

Adoration, the sum of all love he had ever felt for woman, burst his heart in that moment. Tears wet his eyes, and his arms ached with the effort it required not to enfold her and kiss her once when only once such love could be in a kiss. Instead, he took her hands from his shoulders and lighted a cigarette.

"Well, what do you propose to do—to get her back?"

"I've no idea, Justin. But there must be some way."

Now that he was there she could be calm about it. In the night she had been crazed. One minute frenzied with sheer grief; the next, held by a maddening sense of impotence; then anger, a scathing revolt at the injustice of it, bitterness, even hatred.

She it was who calmed him. His anger grew white-hot; she had never seen him angry before. It was, as she said, Dudley's revenge; Dudley's way of paying her back for no longer loving him. A cruel despicable form of vengeance.

They were silent at last, their minds blank. Jean made coffee and got dressed.

There was nothing to do about it.

To appeal to Dudley again, reason with him, beseech him, was useless. That's what he wanted: audible, visual evidence of his power over her. To resort to force would be futile too. It would provoke a truly farcical situation of two parents fighting over the physical possession of their child.

The law, Justin argued. Surely the law would give a mother her child, especially if the mother had always contributed chiefly to its support. But Jean shook her head. The law frightened her.

"I'll make the best of it," she decided, "for a while." Something would happen. It couldn't be as dark as it seemed.

She went back and forth to Trenton. And into that mean little house. The ghosts sighed polite greetings and answered any question she put to them. Doris was given thus and so for breakfast—just as she'd always had. That invariable phrase! Inimically implying: "Don't you think we know how to do with a child!"

They engaged a woman to take care of Doris during the day while they were busy with their dressmaking, a poor neighbor who needed the work. She used to help them out with some sewing occasionally, but her vision had grown so poor that she couldn't see to thread the needle. Jean was furious when, managing to get out before she went home, she saw her. A frail wretched creature who ought to have been in an almshouse. Mrs. Crome said she was a friend of theirs and was thoroughly reliable.

Jean called up Dudley.

"You said you'd get a nurse. I won't have that woman taking care of Doris."

"Why not? What's the matter with her?"

"She's old and blind and dirty and feeble-minded."

"You're crazy. Mother's known her for years."

In her distress, she threatened to take Doris away. She'd take her now.

"Try it!" he dared her. "Try it—and see!"

Jean stayed the night there. She sat through a silent meal with the two women who were especially offended with her on account of her disapproval of their friend, and went immediately up to bed—a cot in Doris' little room. The weather was cold and the house ill-heated. There was an oil-stove that they used, no doubt, to take the chill off the room in the morning. And they insisted upon keeping the window shut because they said it cooled off the house.

It was intolerable.

She went back to New York more miserable than ever.

Justin still argued the law. He lunched with her that day and induced her to let him take her to Mr. Gillingswater. If anybody could help her legally, he could. The senior member of one of the oldest law-firms in America. What he didn't know about the law wasn't worth knowing!

"I had to see him upon another matter the other day and I mentioned this thing to him."

"What did he say?"

"He said he'd have to have all the facts."

"Did you tell him about us?"

"Yes, I did."

Mr. Gillingswater received her graciously and took her into the most legal-looking office she had ever seen. It must have looked exactly the same fifty years ago when his father occupied it; maybe a hundred years ago when a longer-deceased Gillingswater had sat behind that old walnut desk. For certainly all the Gillingswaters had been lawyers. And this one—Nathaniel—was the cumulative essence of them all. Tall, thin-faced, long-nosed, with a high brow bulging slightly to the bald dome, and with eyes that penetrated your very being, he was the living composite of those steel-engraved portraits that hung on the wall.

Sharp, brief, precise, he was the law itself. No longer gracious or even kindly, he was a Solon whose scales weighed justice against the errors of the human mind. The law, not he, was her friend.

"Now tell me the facts, Mrs. Crome." Facts, the bones of the matter, clear positive statements, like dominoes, that he could pick up, examine, consider and put down.

To start her off, and perhaps to illustrate the concentrated form in which he preferred the facts to be rendered him, he stated the little he had had of the case from Marsh.

"Now, the facts, Mrs. Crome," and he sat back in his chair, his eyes intent upon her face, his big ears promising not to miss a word.

She told him her story.

Once in a while he broke in with a question.

"You say that you wanted to leave your husband a

year before you actually did leave him because you no longer loved him. Did you tell him that?"

"Well, yes—practically that."

"What did he say?"

"He begged me to stay. He said that even if I no longer cared for him, he still loved me."

"And that's why you remained with him—because he loved you?"

"Yes."

"You continued to live together as man and wife?"

"Yes."

"During that time he was agreeable to the child remaining at your mother's despite the fact that he had protested about it at first. Was that part of the bargain for remaining with him?"

"No, it wasn't. There was no bargain. I was sorry for him."

"Go ahead, Mrs. Crome."

She resented the word "bargain" he had used. She disliked him for it. Couldn't he see that she wasn't a person who bargained about such things? "Very well, Dudley, I'll agree to go on being your wife, if you will agree to so-and-so and so-and-so!" She hurried on.

"You say," he interrupted again, "you left your husband's domicile when you discovered you were in love with Marsh. This was some four weeks after you had first met Marsh. You were not sorry then for your husband?"

"Of course I was sorry for him. Extremely sorry."

"But not as sorry as you were before—when you de-

cided to remain with him? Your attraction for Marsh, let us say, outweighed your pity for your husband?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it did."

"You told your husband of your intention to leave him, you say."

"Yes, I had already made up my mind. I was packing."

"And under those circumstances—that you were in love now with Marsh—did he countenance your leaving him to go and live with Marsh?"

"No, he didn't—countenance it."

"Did he protest against your leaving him?"

"Very decidedly."

"And he knew that you had passed the preceding week-end with Marsh?"

"Yes, I told him."

"And he was still willing—even desirous of continuing the marital relationship with you?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. There was no question then of my remaining."

"I understand. Go ahead."

At last she was finished.

"And you want the law to exert its power to take the child from the custody of its father and give it into yours." He leaned forward over the desk. "The function of the law, madam, as we understand it in this office—and have for several generations—is to bring relief to the oppressed; those who, in the eyes of society," he explained, "have been victimized by the criminal or illicit intent or action of another person. In this case, the law must find that your husband is the

oppressed party—not you. From what you have told me he seems to have been an almost exemplary husband—kind, indulgent certainly, able and anxious to support you and your child to the extent of his earnings, which, I may say, considerably exceed the earnings of the average householder. Honest, industrious, faithful apparently. His only fault so far as I can gather is that he was unable to retain your affection. In no particular has he failed in his duty as a husband to you or as a father to his child, while you, madam—well"—the ghost of a smile twitched a corner of his mouth—"the same—in the eyes of the law—cannot be said of you."

The law had pronounced judgment; now Nathaniel Gillingswater emerged, gracious, quite charming.

"You must forgive me if I seemed harsh," he said, getting up to dismiss her, "but we can only help you by telling the truth. The unpleasant duty of doctors and lawyers. I'm sorry that we cannot twist the law to assist you in your modern and, if I may say so, courageous experiment with life. I don't think you're right," he hastened to add, "but you're brave."

"Thank you," she murmured, and went through the door he held open to join Justin who was waiting for her.

VIII

With each succeeding week Justin grew more sorely troubled.

Jean's mask of happiness never deceived him. He knew it was only a mask bravely fashioned for him out of love and a principle that sought to exclude him from

a dilemma that was solely of her making. Beneath it lay a wound that time aggravated rather than healed, a wound that reached down to her very vitals and never for an instant ceased aching.

Each visit she paid Trenton took its toll of her. She might laugh, that mask of hers might hide her hurt, but it couldn't hide her face from his eyes. He knew it too well, each plane and contour of it. He knew it two months ago. He couldn't help but see the difference in it now—the little lines, the gauntness of the cheeks, their increasing paleness. She was sick inside and the sickness was creeping through.

He was sick too. And talking about it helped. It was absurd to say that it wasn't his problem. Anything that concerned her so deeply *was* his concern.

"How was she today—all right?"

"Oh, quite all right."

"How long did you stay?"

"About an hour."

"They were rude, I suppose!"

"No ruder than usual. Tell me about Malloy, dear."

"What do you think of the new nurse they got?"

"She's splendid. Do you really think Malloy's motor is all he says it is? How long will it take to build? I want to be the first to go up with you—if you're sure it's safe!"

She laughed to deny the hurt. She made him take her dancing. She flew in his plane. He loved her the more for it—if it were possible to love more. Maybe it was possible. He glimpsed it at times—a godlike form of love—and shrank from following it.

Gillingswater had disappointed him greatly. He sought the advice of another friend, a younger lawyer, but he didn't get much encouragement from him either. He'd take the case, he said, and fight his damnedest, but she'd better know beforehand what the odds were against her. And they were plenty!

"It's the adultery, Marsh," he said, "the adultery! I'd hate to think what a jury would do to her—especially the women on it. The husband would come off a hero. They'd have his picture in all the papers—you know the stuff—'Father Rescues Baby Daughter From Adulterous Mother'! Besides, don't forget this: if it comes to a fight, he'll try to get complete custody of the child. And he'll get it. You're hitting at the sanctity of the home, old boy. The sanctity of the home!"

"Sanctity of the home be damned," Marsh exploded.

"Yes, old boy, but in this case it happens to be the other guy's home!"

Every day Marsh was pushed nearer and nearer to the abyss. They had grown very close since the trouble. The bonds were stronger; they had been tempered with tears.

Jean said he was her life, her love. She was at peace only in his arms. Her life! her love! But there was that other little life, that other love. The one might bring her peace, but for the lack of the other she was dying. One was of the flesh; the other out of her flesh was of the spirit.

And regardless of what she said, if he hadn't come along this wouldn't have happened. She would have gone on—paying with her body for the privilege of

doing as she pleased with her child. That's what it had amounted to when it was stripped bare. The child was the tether Crome had held her by then and was strangling her with now.

Now it was the conflict of love against love, one kind against another kind. True, ideas about ethics and morals and behavior were mixed up in it, but if it weren't for him what chance would they stand against that love?

She had said: "I'm not a whore." She wasn't. Not in her heart. But to herself she had been a whore then. For a whole year; perhaps longer. She could be again. Yet, would she now? Crome hadn't willfully hurt her then; she had been the one who seemingly had hurt him. She had felt pity for him, fondness, affection even; there had been the memory of her dead love to lend her illusion.

Now there was a chasm as wide as the world between them, and only the child to span it. Perhaps, though, the chasm wouldn't have to be spanned. Perhaps it was pride with him, vanity. Perhaps if he felt he could hurt her in some other way he'd trade one weapon for another.

So Marsh argued to himself and wrestled with a dilemma that she said was no concern of his!

One night he rang Crome's bell and waited outside the door. He went there upon impulse. For all his wrestling he had arrived nowhere. The more he thought of his solution the less optimistic he felt about it. With the ordinary woman—yes; but she was no

ordinary woman. She had principles, ideas; the courage to have them, the same courage to fight and to die for them.

To leave her now, to slip out of her existence with a note carefully worded to smash her faith in him, would be but to deal her another blow—and a terrible blow—at a time when she least could support it. No, he had been mad to think of such a thing. He abandoned it utterly.

But the impulse to see Crome had come out of it, come out of the intense feeling against the man that possessed him. What he hoped to accomplish he didn't know. Had no idea even of what he intended to say. But he wanted to see him. He wanted to see him face to face.

Crome opened the door.

"Yes?" he demanded, not knowing who the man was.

"I'm Justin Marsh," and he pushed his way in before Dudley could slam the door to.

"What do you want?" He was ready for bed in dressing-gown and slippers. Marsh's appearance at that hour frightened him a little. What did he want with him in the middle of the night?

"I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"What do you suppose!"

"Well, I haven't anything to say to you, Marsh. And I don't care to hear anything you've got to say to me. So get out."

"I'm not going to get out," Marsh said with deadly quiet, "not until I've said what I came to say. It won't take very long."

"Well, say it—and say it quick!"

They moved into the living-room.

"Well, what is it?"

Marsh took his time. He put his hat down on the table and made himself comfortable in a chair. He wanted to light a cigarette, but if he had he might have burst out laughing. The situation was ironic enough! He had made a melodramatic entrance and now he had nothing to say!

"I came here," he began, "upon impulse. True, I've had reason to think of you a good deal lately, but I had no intention of coming to see you. What brought me was possibly a belief I've always held that most of the trouble in the world is caused by people not understanding other people's motives. Jean and you and myself are the three elements of a very commonplace triangle. None of us are very happy about it. If we were we wouldn't be hating one another. I, frankly, have been hating your guts, Crome. You hate mine. I hate you because you are hurting Jean—but damn it, man, if I can understand why you want to hurt her."

"Who says I'm hurting her?"

"I say so. You know damn' well you are—and intentionally." He glared up at him, challenging him to deny it. "The only reason I can think of for your wanting to hurt her is—revenge. You're under the impression that she treated you badly and you're out to pay her back. Is that it?"

He didn't answer.

"Vengeance!" Marsh pressed him.

"Whatever it is is my business, Marsh!"

"My business too. Very much my business. All right," he hurried on, in his reasoning tone, "granted that that is your purpose—God knows vengeance is a common enough passion—I'm sure you can't realize what you're doing."

"What *I'm* doing!"

"Yes—what you're doing by employing that particular method of revenge."

Dudley laughed. "I know precisely what I'm doing. What the hell do you think I am—an idiot?"

"You're worse than an idiot," Marsh informed him. "Otherwise you'd realize what a mad, cruel thing you've done. Even a dog leaves a bitch her pups. You've taken a child from its mother. You had to resort to a legal technicality in order to do it. If the child had been a bastard you couldn't have done it. You'd have had no rights in the child whatsoever. You have no rights now. You don't imagine that a marriage—or a law—makes her child yours, do you?—or half yours, or a thousandth part yours."

"No?"—interesting! "I'm only its father!"

"Father!" he roared contemptuously. "What the hell is a father! Did you suffer to bring it into the world? Did you carry it inside you for nine months and nourish it with your blood and the fiber of your being? What you did every man can do any night of his life. Don't talk like an ass, man. You know as well as I do that a child is the thing of its mother—biologically, morally,

by every right of nature. A few words mumbled by a priest or the dictum of jurists doesn't alter that. Can't alter it." His voice dropped low. "Crome," he asked conversationally, "you weren't there when Doris was born, were you?"

"What do you mean—there?"

"In the room at the time?"

"Of course not."

"Too bad you weren't! If you'd ever watched a woman give birth to a child you'd understand what I'm telling you."

"Oh, I understand!" he flashed, his anger rising again.

"If you did, you wouldn't have committed such a crime. That's what it is—a cold, deliberate crime—with not even the excuse of passion for having done it!"

Dudley suddenly had had enough. Suddenly it struck him that he was being mercilessly berated. And by Marsh! He turned red with shame; then white with fury.

"Get out!" he said tensely.

Marsh didn't move.

"Get out!"—his low voice quivering.

"One thing more, Crome, and I'll go."

"Go now, I say!"

Marsh got up; he took his hat. "I hope," he said, as tense with anger as Dudley now, "I've made things clear to you, and that you'll act accordingly. What I mean precisely is that you'll give Doris back to Jean."

"Because *you* say so!" He screamed it in his face.

"If you don't," Marsh shot the words at him, "I'll smash every bone in your God-damned body."

Laughter—mocking, frenzied, hysterical—followed him out through the door.

IX

Justin hailed a cab and then, changing his mind, decided to walk. He felt the need of walking. The April wind was cool against his hot cheeks.

Inwardly he was curiously calm. It seemed scarcely possible that a few minutes ago he had been storming with emotion, actually trembling with anger.

And he had gone there upon impulse! Practically forced his way in and then hadn't known what the devil to say! Awkward interval. But when he got started, well,—retracing his argument—he wasn't altogether displeased. A bit melodramatic—but logical, geometric.

Vengeance; method employed; Law as a flail, flail to fatherhood. "What the hell is a father!" That was the phrase that had really set him going. After that, he had lost control.

The hideous injustice of it all, searing his very soul with a blinding light, had done the rest. Thrown all life into blacks and whites. Must have radiated his words with a wild atavistic righteousness.

In retrospect, he was inclined to be a trifle amused. If it hadn't been for that final ultimatum he had delivered, he might have laughed aloud. That kept him serious; turned him even solemn.

He quickened his step to keep pace with his thoughts. Vengeance! "You're under the impression that she treated you badly," he recaptured his phrase, "and you're out to pay her back." Too bad he hadn't remembered that phrase when he promised to smash every bone in his God-damned body! Crome had treated her badly, so he was going to pay Crome back! God, the irony of it!

For all his fine intentions then he had succeeded only in making a bad situation worse. If ever Crome had any idea of giving up the child, he certainly wouldn't now. Pride alone would stop him. And to imagine for an instant that he'd be intimidated into giving it up was too absurd! The man wasn't a physical coward.

But he'd said he would thrash him, and he would! Damn' well deserved it, the rotten hypocrite! It would do him good—him, Marsh—even if it didn't do any other good.

The difficulty was going to be to find the opportunity, the place. No use going to his apartment. In two minutes the whole house would be aroused. Neighbors, police, then reporters. Ridiculous too to think that Crome would consider the matter in the light of a duel and meet him somewhere by appointment.

He'd have to spirit him away. That meant he'd need assistance. Thugs who for a monetary consideration would whisk him off in a car and take him to some prearranged rendezvous. An empty house. In the country preferably where there'd be no chance of interference from the law.

The idea shocked him rather. Conspiring with crimi-

nals. All that. To resort to force when in truth he didn't believe in force. When the actual time came he might be cold, calm—as he was now—controlled entirely by reason. He might have no inclination to pummel the man, rush in with flying fists to smash and bruise and knock him down. The whole thing would strike him as ludicrous!

What a fool he had been! Perhaps he was being a fool now to consider it any further. He'd flown in a rage and shouted out a lot of unconsidered words. Forget it. Forget the whole episode. To threaten physical violence was folly anyway. To carry out such a threat was little short of madness. Crome would think him a coward of course, but what did that matter! To hell with Crome!

Still, he would like to give him a good hiding! If ever a man deserved it, he did.

Then, for the first time since he'd left Crome's apartment, he thought of Jean. He wouldn't tell her. Not even that he'd seen Crome. It would only worry her. Maybe in the morning he'd see it as an unthinkable piece of madness. He had had other mad moments in his life! And if not, well—in any case he'd have to give Crome a little time. Four or five days. Perhaps a couple of weeks. Even a month wouldn't be out of the question.

And in the meantime, he thought, immeasurably relieved, he could put it out of his mind.

He reached his house and, with the shame-faced feeling of having made a shocking fool of himself, he went to bed.

And in the morning, as he had anticipated, the thing had taken on the aspect of a nightmare. An unthinkable piece of madness!

The days passed and it was relegated to the limbo of forgotten things. Not altogether forgotten of course. Sometimes, at the sight of Jean's face, the whole crazy impulse would burst into being again. His hands would fairly itch to smash and grapple and tear. That he didn't believe in force didn't deter him from turning to it instinctively—when reason had failed. And if he could believe that force, by the remotest possibility, would have solved the difficulty, doubtless he would have embraced it. But he didn't believe it.

So the shadows over their lives prevailed. So far as either of them could see, the shadows would continue to prevail. What was to lift them?

One morning, to Marsh's infinite surprise, Dudley telephoned him.

"I've been thinking a lot about what we were discussing the other night," he said in a not unfriendly tone. "I guess you meant what you said?"

"I certainly did. Most emphatically!"

"Well,"—hesitantly, "I'd like to see you again, Marsh."

"Any time you say."

"I don't suppose you'd come out here—to Trenton?"

"I'll come now—if you say so."

"Well, make it this afternoon. I'll meet you, and then we can go some place and—and have it out." He laughed a little. "You won't say anything though to—to anybody?"

"Of course not."

His astonishment was boundless.

Hanging up the receiver, he signaled the operator impatiently to give her Jean's number. But he didn't give it. He hung up. A few hours wouldn't make much difference after those intolerably long weeks, and he'd never forgive himself if he buoyed up her hopes and then had to shatter them.

He went down by train and found Dudley outside in his car. The meeting was awkward. Dudley merely nodded as he opened the door for Marsh to get in. And the drive was silent.

In the hope of drawing him out, Marsh said:

"I appreciate your calling me, Crome."

Dudley only grunted.

He drove on. Away from the town, he turned off the highway and proceeded along a countryish road that took them to what appeared to be a small farm. Through the narrow driveway the red house looked stark and ugly against naked elms.

But Dudley didn't drive up to the house. He stopped outside the old barn.

"Here we are," he said, and got out.

Justin followed him, a trifle mystified.

Dudley flung open the wide doors, and they went inside the barn. Marsh thought that perhaps it had been done over into a sort of studio. It hadn't. It was just a barn with the sweet dry odor of stored hay, an old wheelbarrow, a few broken implements—the relics of labor and sweat.

"A friend of mine said I could use this place,"

Dudley explained, "and I thought it would be as good a spot as any. We won't be disturbed. And," he added, with that mirthless laugh, "if you make a really good job of it, you'll have a chance to make a get-away!"

Marsh looked at him—and understood. Bewilderment, anger at having been tricked, admiration, emotion upon emotion swept over him. He watched Dudley strip off his coat and throw it over a broken trestle. Mechanically, the whole thing striking him as some wild fantastic dream, he took off his coat too and rolled up his shirt sleeves. Was Crome kidding him? Was he going to burst out laughing in a minute and say he did it just to see if Marsh meant what he'd said?—and then get down to business, reasonable talk, about giving up Doris?

"Well—I'm ready when you are!"

Marsh stared at him. "Look here, Crome," he wanted to say, "this is ridiculous. I don't believe in violence!"

Dudley was waiting for him to attack. Hadn't *he* made the threat?

"You're yellow, you son-of-a-bitch! I thought you were!"

Marsh still stared. Dudley's laughter mocked him. If he had the courage, he'd say what he believed and back down. Yes, in a moment of rage he'd said that he'd smash every bone in his body, but to do it was madness! What would they gain—either of them?

But he didn't have the courage.

"So you're just a big bag of hot air!" Dudley had moved close. He spat the words in his face. "Just a

lousy fourflusher! What are you waiting for—encouragement? Too bad Jean isn't here to see what a welching bastard—!"

Marsh hit out—and missed. Dudley sprang back just in time, his jeering laughter echoing through the barn. He laughed gleefully, triumphantly. Danced up to Marsh and away, daring him to come on.

"No bones smashed yet!" he taunted him. "Guess you're not so hot at that! Try the left this time!"

The next moment they were at it—grim, watchful, their fists flashing out. Justin still had no stomach for it. He hit out feebly, unable to put any force back of his blows. The real Marsh was still standing off, his hands bound, his will bound.

This thing that feinted and sparred and then struck was an automaton that moved when the real Marsh pulled the strings. It was a game. You couldn't go at it seriously. You couldn't pull the strings hard, because if you did the arms would fly out like flails and do injury perhaps.

Not so Crome. He hit to hurt. When they clinched, he tore himself free like an animal caught in a trap and rushed in again, snarling, his eyes glittering and bloodshot. This was what he had been waiting for for weeks, months. For weeks, for months, this poison had been accumulating in him, envenoming his whole being. Not until Marsh had shouted that threat at him had he quite realized that that—the chance to smash every bone in his God-damned body—was what he had been hungering for; as a dying man burning up with fever

thirsts for water. To smash, to crush, to tear. To kill. Not actually to kill—because of the consequences. But to come within an ace of killing.

What a fool he'd been not to go after Marsh with that purpose in mind! To smash that face, to smash away that self-confident expression, to make it crooked and hideous forever! Hadn't he realized that that was what he had been aching for? What a fool not to have known until Marsh himself had told him!

"Atta boy, Marsh!" Whooping, gloating. "Asked for it, didn't you?—you damn' yellow louse!"

God, it was good to have him here! Alone. Not a soul within a mile. He'd leave him there, by Christ! Beat him into a pulp and leave the son-of-a-bitch there to shift for himself! Let him crawl out into the cold! Or let him not crawl out!

Neither of them was trained for this kind of thing. Both panted hard after a few minutes. Justin was already hurt, one shoulder sorely bruised when he had been driven hard against the rough wall of the barn, his mouth cut and bleeding.

Now he was driven hard in the other direction. Blows pounded through his guard. He stumbled backwards over an end of wood and went sprawling.

"Get up!" Dudley screamed, his arms swinging loose. He held himself back from rushing at him and kicking him, kicking him in the stomach so he would double up and writhe. "Get up!" he bellowed.

Round and round, from one side of the barn to the other. Slowly the real Marsh and the automaton were merging into one. Now they went down together and

rolled over and over, fighting, clawing. Crome got him by the throat and he wrenched free. Maybe Crome let go.

Rolling, scraping, straining to gain supremacy. Crome's knee caught Marsh a terrific jolt in the stomach. He went flat for a second, gasping. Crome rained blows in his face. Wild, savage blows. Through them, in one painful instant, he saw Crome's face. Saw it clear, magnified into a horrible mad, white mask that was a little bloody.

The next instant he was on his feet, his pulses pounding the fearful fact into his suddenly lucid brain that he was fighting for his life.

There was only one Marsh then—desperate, cool, frightened.

That made them evenly matched; Dudley a little the stronger, Justin a little the calmer.

Not a word now. Only a grunt. A thud as they went down. A snarl or a groan from pain. Panting; growing weak. Struggling up, backing away to gain a moment's rest. Bleeding, bruised, grimy; but the brain too intent upon inflicting hurt to realize hurt.

Crome was whimpering a little with the frenzy of a frustrated beast. He didn't know he was whimpering. He had bitten his tongue, and he spat mouthfuls of blood. That would weaken him. But he must, he *must*, finish Marsh!

He rushed in again and was met with a jarring blow to the throat. The pain made him blind for a second, sick. He staggered back, trying to see, struggling to keep his knees from sagging. He couldn't. He dropped

like a dead thing, the impact jolting fire to his brain. His head was made of lead; too heavy for his neck to support. His whole body was lead. Only his brain wasn't.

Fire—wild, red fire—that burned out of his eyes like lightning . . . along the floor to a broken pick-head. Too far to reach. He must. He must reach it. Get his fingers around it. One blow. One blow. Only one it'd take to crush in his skull.

Suddenly he was strong again. Suddenly the pick-head was in his hand, and he was scrambling to his feet. As he did so, he caught Marsh's eye. And the iron dropped out of his hand as though it had been white-hot.

It had been white-hot. Letting it go did no good. It seared into him, deeper, deeper. Marsh's eyes were behind it, a merciless mallet of derisive contempt.

A thing live with frenzy, he flew at those eyes to beat the cruelty out of them. Screaming, he flew at them. Whimpering and mad, he drove Marsh against the rough boards, and pounded him madly, madly. He felt the body go limp suddenly. Only the pressure of his own body held it up against the wall. It slipped and crumpled and rolled over against his feet.

But still he wanted to pound. That blind madness still held him. Now it was frustrated.

"Get up! Get up!" He stamped. He shook. He stepped back and looked at the body lying there, inert. He rushed at it, and kicked it. He kicked it in the back. And then—Christ!—he saw that bit of iron again. The

kick and the iron. The iron and those eyes. He staggered back, stumbled, collapsed—whimpering, screaming, suddenly sobbing:

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!"

He heard his own sobs echoing from the rafters. It was horrible, and he stopped. He dragged himself up to a sitting position and looked over at the body. Its back was towards him.

He began to cry. That was madness too, he thought; and stopped.

Then Marsh moved. He moved and groaned, as life crept back into him. Dudley crawled over to him.

"Marsh! Marsh!"

He rolled him on his back. In the dim light his face was a dark obliteration. Bending over him, the blood from his own cuts dripped and mingled with Justin's blood. Shuddering, he drew back, and fishing out a handkerchief he tried to wipe Marsh's face clean, because the sight of it made him sick. He wiped his own face too, and felt the swollen lumps. It was like feeling a rubber face. He realized then that he was seeing out of only one eye.

"Marsh! Marsh!" He shook him.

Presently Justin opened his eyes, gazed for a long time up at the rafter; and then, remembering, raised one hand to touch his face.

"For Christ's sake let's get out of here!" Crome's voice cut through the slow-lifting fog to him. "Can you get up? Try! Try, can't you?" He tugged at him, half-dragged him to his knees. Then up to his feet.

He stood there, a hand on Crome's shoulder, swaying, waiting for his head to clear. He looked at Dudley, and winced.

"All right," he managed to murmur, "let's go!"

They went out. Clouds had gathered; it was cold and dusk was setting in.

Dudley felt he had to close the barn doors. They struggled with them, staggering, and finally got them to. Then they saw a well some distance away. They took hold of the handle and pumped. Their combined strength was hardly sufficient to work the handle up and down. Water came at last. Water to drink. Water to wash away some of the blood.

Then back to the car. One of Dudley's hands was numb and swollen, but he said he guessed he could drive. At the end of a mile he had to stop on account of the pain. Justin took the wheel. His hands had commenced to ache too; and minute by minute the agony became more excruciating.

They made a garage. There Justin hired another car. They both stumbled in. Dudley gave his address to the man.

When the car drew up, Justin looked at the little house apathetically.

Dudley clambered out, and stood for a moment looking into the car at Marsh, not knowing what to say.

"You're a good scrapper, Crome," Justin said.

Dudley grunted, and turned away. Good scrapper! That blasted piece of iron! Christ, how he hated the man!

Two hours later—a year, it seemed—the driver

helped Justin up to his apartment and gave him into the care of his servant.

There was a message from Jean, several messages.

"Justin—Justin,"—her voice over the wire was like the ringing of bells—"where have you been? I've been trying all afternoon to reach you, to tell you—I've got Doris here. He sent her back. With the nurse. He said I can keep her."

She stopped—and there was silence.

"Justin—why don't you say something?"

"When—when," he stammered, "when did he send her back?"

"This afternoon."

"Good God!"

"What? What did you say, Justin? I can't hear you. Your voice sounds so strange. And you haven't said you're glad. You're not ill, Justin? There's nothing the matter with you?"

"No, dear—no."

The phone dropped from his hand.

Doris was five. They were all relatively older. Elinor had turned thirty.

Barry Crome was dead.

He had never been really well again since that old trouble he had had with his eyes. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. Up for a few weeks and, then, just as he was getting his strength, he'd fall ill of something else. The doctors said his whole constitution was undermined through his excesses. Maybe it was, he admitted, but he couldn't be expected to change his way of life at his age. He'd always drunk, and he wasn't going to quit now. And so long as he could have a woman he meant to have her. There were a hell of a lot of men

who couldn't. Thank God, he could! Didn't know of anything he liked better! And if through it he was to be saved a few years of senility, then all the more reason for continuing.

Now he was dead; and they were going to say prayers for his soul.

Only Dudley and Jean and Violet Waters were there in the little mortuary parlor. And there were only twice that number of floral tributes. He had had friends by the score, but in the last two years he had been too ill to do anything for them, too discouraged to be amusing and make them laugh even; and consequently one by one had dropped away.

It hadn't mattered much because he had had Violet of course.

She was inconsolable.

"I don't think—they ought—to s-say prayers over him," she whispered, bursting into tears again. "He never believed in—in prayers."

"Well, they don't have to say prayers," Jean whispered back. "I'm sure Dudley will have them do as you wish." She glanced over at him, and he frowned back.

Violet looked at him pathetically.

"It's all right with me," he said none too graciously.

But that seemed to frighten Violet. "Perhaps we should," she cried shrilly. "I'd hate to think afterwards that we didn't."

"They won't do him any harm certainly," Jean assured her.

"But, Jean—he—he'd laugh."

"Well, make up your mind," Dudley growled.

"You say, Jean—you say what to do."

Jean wondered—as they sat there listening to the fervent voice of the minister beseeching the Heavenly Father, the Almighty God Who in His wisdom giveth and taketh from us, to receive into His care the spirit of this dear departed brother—whether Barry Crome was listening too. If he was, no doubt he was laughing. She hoped he was laughing. Happy now and well and able to enjoy himself. What a capacity he had had for enjoying himself!

Little things he said came back to her as, sitting there, that fervent voice passed through her like a song without words. "Just a decaying old bastard with nothing to show for my pains. . . . You'd never guess from looking at me now that I had ideals once. Ideals and an idea about living." An idea about living! What idea? Where was it now?

He looked different in his casket; peaceful—yes; but pale, waxlike, his features at rest so that you could study them. In life you studied only his expressions, and they had been ever-fleeting; lighting and dimming his eyes, pulling at his mouth; twitching, puffing, wrinkling his old face so that you never did know it feature by feature.

She remembered the first time she met him. Other times. The day he had given her the money. That was the day he told her that he too had ideals—and an idea about living. And the day she told him about Doris, about the baby she was going to have.

"You'll have it now?" he said, queryingly. "You're sure! You won't go and change your mind now. I'm

an old fool, Jean, but—while I'm not going back on anything I've ever said to you—it'll be a great load off my mind!"

The service was over. They were going to take him away at once. Jean thought it was foolish of Violet to go out to the cemetery. It was bitterly cold and snowing. But Violet insisted upon going.

Outside in the snow stood the hearse and two carriages.

"Drive with her, Dudley," Jean said. "And see that she gets back all right."

"She'll cry all the way," he grumbled, but he led her to his carriage and helped her in. Then he came back to Jean for a moment. "Are you going out to Willow Gardens tomorrow? If you are, I'll come out in the afternoon. There's something I'd like to talk over."

The relationship that she had dreamed of in those early days of their separation was almost realized. In the past several months, without her doing anything to effect it, it had gradually come into being. After the fight there had been an interval when she had quite despaired of it.

For more than a year Dudley stayed away altogether. If the child was hers—if that was the idea—then she could have it! That had passed. Little by little the enmity vanished, until now the barrier to friendship had become almost imperceptible.

The Sunday was warm. The deep blanket of snow shrank into the earth, dissolved and ran down the glistening trunks of trees already filled with sap and waiting to burst into bud again.

It was the last chance Doris would have to use the sled Dudley had given her for her birthday. They took her with them, the sled at the end of a long loop of rope that brought their hands close as together they trudged along.

"I hate to talk to you about this," Dudley said, after they had gone a little way, "after—well, everything. It makes me feel sort of rotten. But there's a girl I've known for quite a while and—"

"—and you want to marry her!"

"Well—yes," he admitted.

"Who is she?"

"Oh, nobody you know. Her name's Peggy Glenn. There's nothing extraordinary about her."

"Pretty?"

"Well—naturally! Rather on your type, as a matter of fact. Dark hair, greenish sort of eyes, and fair skin. A bit taller than you."

"And are you very much in love with her, Dudley?"

He looked at her sharply, and trudged on for a moment in silence.

"No, I'm not," he confessed, "not awfully. Not like I was with you—if that's what you mean. But she is with me, or she thinks she is, and I want to marry her because—well, going on alone isn't much fun. Besides, everybody's better off married—even if you don't think so."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you don't; do you?"

"I don't know," she returned thoughtfully.

"You mean," he said, laughing, "you didn't like be-

ing married to me, but you'd like to be married to Marsh. Well, you will be able to—then."

"Yes," she agreed quietly.

They trudged on.

"There'll be the usual unpleasantness," Dudley took it up. "Lies—and all that. I have a lawyer though who'll make it as easy for you as possible. You'll have to appear in court though and—"

"Oh, I don't mind that, Dudley. I'm only too glad to do it. And I'm delighted you've found some one who'll be to you what—well, what I failed to be."

"That remains to be seen!" he growled cynically.

"I wish though that you were really in love with her."

"Oh, sometimes I think I am," he said. "But when you've cared awfully for somebody, I guess you can't ever care that much again for somebody else." There was inquiry in his tone, and he waited for her to agree with him.

But Jean said nothing.

II

Spring came again: April with its rains, May with its flowers. Warm life springing into being; human hearts awakening to love.

For Jean it seemed more like autumn; the rains brought foreboding; the flowers brought fears.

Unlike preceding springs they did not go to the little farm near Saratoga. It was the end of May and they had not been once. Justin was away most of the time in Buffalo where he was interested in the development of a new plane. It absorbed him utterly. He flew down

to see her; and then he flew away again. True, that was what he had always done—flown to her, and flown away—but it wasn't the same now.

Tonight he was in town and they were going to the opening of a revue. He was to call for her at seven.

For a long while as she dressed she studied her face in the mirror. Studied it intently, apprehensively; wondering how old she looked compared to how old she actually was. Younger-looking certainly than twenty-nine. Could pass quite easily for twenty-five. No lines yet. Skin still smooth.

As though that mattered!

She caught herself at it, and got up impatiently. How she had always hated women who wished they were younger, tried to make themselves younger; pretended to feel younger; all that in a frightened effort to hold on to a man! That kind of thing was contemptible!

Other things too that in other women she despised seemed to be cropping out lately in her. Petty things. Hurt feelings over imaginary neglect. Jealousy. Doubts, doubts of all kinds; fears, all kinds of fears too! Constantly wondering, wondering.

She kept glancing at the clock, hoping he would come a little early, wondering if he'd stay over tomorrow so that she could have him with her tomorrow night too.

The telephone rang, and her heart sank. It was only Alan Stover ringing up to tell her about some office matter and to say, incidentally, that Merrie got drunk again after she left and had had a dreadful row with Floyd Howe, who happened to drop in.

"Thanks, Alan," she said, and went back to her dressing.

Justin came at seven. They went out to dine and on to the theater. It was delightful and amusing, as revues designed for summer fare seldom are; but it dragged for Jean and she was glad when at last it was over.

"Shall we go on somewhere?" he asked, as they stood in the crowd waiting for a cab.

"Do you want to, Justin?"

"Don't you?"

Unreasonably, foolishly, she was hurt. He had been away a whole long week. Wasn't the show enough, and the restaurant, where they had sat with hordes of other people?

The hurt lasted even after they were back at home. Maybe it had been there before; for a long time maybe; and it needed only the littlest lance to bring it out.

His love assuaged it though. Lying in his arms, her blood growing warm beneath his caresses, she drifted back into harmony with herself. Into harmony with him. Kisses, kisses. His hands smoothing all the little aches away. Tight in his arms, close, with the long-lasting hunger knitting their flesh and merging their consciousnesses into that one vast infinite consciousness. No question now of whether he was hers or who else's he might be tomorrow. No fears, no hurts, no wondering. Kisses, kisses tender and soft, kisses telling her this could not be now unless it was always to be. Foolish Jean, foolish Jean! How good, how wondrous it was to yield into that oblivion that yawned tremulously to

swallow her presently. Presently, yes. Foolish Jean. Foolish, happy, happy Jean!

Rather suddenly, gently withal, he thrust her away from him. And laughed. It might have been Jovian laughter if it hadn't been strangled in his throat. It would have come out from his belly roaring into the room if it hadn't been garrotted in his throat with a spike dipped in aloes. As it was, it was scarce laughter at all. A sound of mirthlessness that in its pain had snatched at laughter by mistake.

"Justin—Justin—why did you laugh—like that?"

"I don't know," he answered dully.

"But you must know—why you laughed, Justin." She sat up in the darkness and looked down at him.

"One of my moods," he said from the pillow. "They play hell with me. Turn me sour like a bottle of milk. Then I'm no good for anything. Nothing seems any good."

"Nothing?" His words tore like talons through her naked breast.

He didn't answer. He bowed his head on his knees and murmured something about not having any business coming there tonight.

She wanted to touch him. Draw him close, draw him down on the pillow beside her and soothe his misery. But he was too far to touch. Not even her voice would reach him.

"Oh, forgive me, dear," he turned to her suddenly, ready to laugh it all away, or pretend to laugh it away. "That's the trouble with living so—well, vitally. When you're down, you're all the way down. At the very

bottom. And it's very muddy down there—you've no idea!" His arms were around her again, and he drew her down and close in his embrace.

She shouldn't let him, she knew. She should say something to stop him; to tell him that—that it wasn't any use—any more.

His kisses seemed to scald her because she was so cold.

She lay awake for a long time afterwards. There was no sleep any more. Yet she must have fallen off, for she didn't hear him get out of bed. But she was awake again and conscious suddenly that he wasn't there. It frightened her horribly.

She called out: "Justin!"—expecting only the echo of her own shrill voice for reply.

"Yes, dear?"

She crept out of bed and went to him in the room beyond. He was sitting in a chair by the window, smoking a cigarette.

"What is it, Justin?" she asked him. "What's troubling you, dear?"

"Nothing, darling—nothing at all."

"There is, Justin—and I want to know."

An arm went about her; a hand patted her tenderly.

She sank down on her knees and put her head in his lap.

He went on smoking, one hand stroking her neck.

"Sometimes," he said after long minutes had passed, "sometimes, Jean, I wish you'd had a child by me."

She looked up quickly, startled. It was the last thing in all the world she expected him to say.

"You'd like me," she whispered ecstatically, "to have a child, Justin—Justin, dear?" That frozen something inside her was melting back to life in the warm tears of her heart. Her eyes glistened in the faint gray of the breaking dawn.

He took her head in his hands and looked at her long, smiling a little, then grave again, stern.

And he said: "No."

Quite simply, terribly sure of it,—no.

But to her it was as though he had said much more: "No, not now. It's too late now. Now it wouldn't do any good. Now it would be like tying something together because it was broken."

"Go back to bed, dear—it's cold."

She looked at the dawn through the window.

"I'll have to be getting along," he said. "I promised to meet Jukes on the field at six. He said he'd have her warmed up by then."

He lighted another cigarette and went in the bedroom to dress. Jean made coffee. She sat with him while he drank it. She wanted to ask him when he was coming again, how long he intended to be gone. It was so lonely when he wasn't there. Last time it had been a week. The time before a week. And he stayed only a night.

"Please, please, dear Justin," she wanted most fearfully to say, "come back to me soon. It only takes you a couple of hours to fly back. I used not to mind your going from me. I used not to mind your absence. Now —I don't know why—you take my very life with you when you go. The days are dull, and the nights are like

a desert. You are a man, Justin, and I am your love. That's all I am, all I want to be—ever. Your love, your woman. Please, please, Justin dear. And the next time you come, we'll talk about the child again. Perhaps you won't say no then. Why did you say no, Justin? It hurt so terribly."

He sipped the hot coffee until it was gone. He said he wouldn't have any more.

"Good-by, my darling. Good-by, my Jean."

He crushed her tight in his arms. He kissed her hard and long on the mouth. He looked at her for an instant as though he were going to tell her something. Then he kissed her once again.

She followed him to the door and let him out. She closed it after him and came back into the room. It was filled now with the ghostly dawn and with a horrible emptiness that she felt would be there always.

III

She wanted to know; and she was afraid to ask. She must know. The uncertainty was driving her mad. Yet that very uncertainty was all the raft she had to keep her afloat.

Every day, every night, she relived each little scene of that evening, recollecting his words, his tone of voice, his expressions, searching them for new shreds of hope that she might have overlooked.

It seemed incredible that she had let him go without finding out all that he had in mind. Surely she must have known that afterwards she would be left in this agony! Scarcely a word had she said. Dumb and ach-

ing, she had sat with him, watched him and, finally, without a word, let him kiss her and go. Not even—"Come back soon, Justin!" when she followed him out to the door, or—"Shall I see you soon, Justin?" Such a little question to ask; and he would have had to answer "Yes" or "No."

But that hadn't been their way. He came and he went. He stayed as long as he pleased. Sometimes she was sad for a moment when he went, but the sadness was sweet somehow. Soon he would be back. Soon love would bring him. Soon. No need to ask when; no fears; no urge to pin him down to Wednesday or Thursday or Friday.

Was that why she hadn't asked—because she hated to spoil even once that which held for her such pride and pleasure? Or was it fear? If it wasn't fear, surely the agony she was suffering now would let her forget her pride long enough to write one of the letters she was forever composing in her mind:

"Was it just a mood, Justin—as you said—or is it ended for you? And you couldn't bring yourself to tell me! Send me word, dear Justin, and don't be afraid of hurting me. I love you (you know that) but I'm not a coward."

A few lines; and by return of post she'd know.

Tomorrow, she decided.

And again—tomorrow.

To speed the time, to blot it away, she turned to her work, for which she had had little enthusiasm lately. That would be her refuge if—well, if it was ended for Justin, and she would have to find in it an anodyne.

Then let her find it now, and the knowledge that it was there would help her!

Blot out Justin with manuscripts. Blot him away with phone calls and talk. Talk and more talk, with authors, with editors, with Merrie! Keep going! Keep going! Get home dog-tired so you would sleep. Get up early and start in again.

She kept going. She went home dog-tired. She got up early and started in again. But there was no sleep, and no anodyne to be found in her refuge.

On the contrary. Everything tended to irritate her frayed nerves more. Manuscripts, authors, editors! What did they and their petty affairs mean to her any longer? The business of fiction—yarns contrived out of the imagination to divert and amuse people who had nothing more important to think about! Buying it, selling it, hurrying publishers to accept or reject it, phoning, arguing, worrying. What did it matter? What did any of it matter?

But it must matter! It did! And because it didn't, she got angry with it—angry as a child is angry with a toy it can't manage to make go. She had no use for it any more; no use for any of them.

Elinor was a fool. Going around with that sad martyred expression because she didn't have the courage to take love once she had found it! So quiet, so good, so controlled now. But always with that sad frustrated look; yearning back of those fading eyes, hopelessness in the droop of that thinning mouth!

Alan too with his pale bookish face and his air of self-pity! Was all the world to feel sorry for him, buoy

him up, and push him along with words of encouragement and jobs, and treat him as though he were some kind of invalid, because he wasn't normal? Great men, the very greatest, had been sodomites; poets, statesmen, kings.

And Merrie with his drunkenness! Quarreling with authors, bungling and muddling up everything!

One evening she had it out with him. All afternoon he had irritated her by perpetually coming into her office upon one pretext or another, sitting down, taking up her time with aimless and protracted discussion of trifles. And each time he came he was a little drunker than before.

It was late. Past seven. Just before she went home, she had reason to go into his room and found him slumped down in his chair, letters and papers brushed drunkenly onto the floor, the work he had undertaken to do uncompleted.

He straightened up when she came in and tried to pull himself together.

"Going home, Jean?" he enquired, wiping his mouth with his hand. "Sit down a minute—sit down here—that's a good girl—and let's have a li'l talk about Pamela Yates' stuff. You know, Jean, I think you're wrong about her—dashed if I don't. Here—where did it go?—just you read this, Jean—just these few paragraphs. Where did it get to?"

She picked up the papers from the floor and put them in front of him; and watched him fumble through them for the paragraphs he wanted her to

read. All the while babbling on in an inane eulogy of Pamela Yates.

"We're going to do something big with her, Jean, something big, I say, or I miss my guess. There! Read that, Jean. Read that for yourself!"

"We'll never do anything big," she said coldly, "if you don't stop drinking."

"Drinking! Me! I've only had one li'l drink, Jean."

"One! You've been drinking all afternoon. You're drunk now. You're always drunk."

"I assure you, Jean—I assure you—"

"Every afternoon you start drinking and every night by this time you're in this condition."

"No, Jean—no!"

"And nothing's ever accomplished unless Elinor or Alan or I do it!" She wasn't sorry for him tonight, as she generally was. The sight of him disgusted her. Drink made his face greenish, the murky eyes swimmy, the thin mouth loose and uncontrollable. "And whatever we do," she went on, venting her pent-up irritation upon him, "you undo—when you're too drunk to know what you're doing. If you were sober, you'd know as well as I do that that Yates stuff is trash of the worst kind. Stupid, cheap rubbish!"

"Elinor said she liked it," he put in lamely.

"Elinor! What does Elinor know! Alan read it and I read some of it—and it's trash—trash, I tell you."

"All right, Jean—all right. There's no need to fly into a temper with me. If you say it's trash, maybe it is."

"I'm not flying into a temper," she retorted angrily,

"but there's no point in my working my head off when everything I do is spoiled or bungled. This business is hard enough as it is. We've all the opposition on the outside to overcome without a lot of opposition on the inside too. It's not worth it, Merrie. I tell you plainly. When I first started with you, you didn't touch a drop —not a drop. And now look at you! If you had any excuse to drink, it was in those old days when we worked like dogs to put this business on its feet—and while it may be your business, I put just as much hard work into it as you. Now, when we've got it going and we're making money and we've everything to look forward to, you want to smash it to pieces—"

"I don't, Jean. I assure you—"

"Well, you can smash it to pieces for all I care—but I won't be here to see it. I'll get out and then you can do as you please. You can drink in the morning too. Drink all day. Every day. But I've had enough of it!"

He got up and stood unsteadily looking at her. He tried once or twice to interrupt; he stammered a moment and suddenly sat down, swallowing, struggling helplessly out of the fog of his drunkenness.

His eyes blinked; his fingers, gripping the arms of his chair, twitched nervously. He had never seen her in a temper before. And she meant what she said! Shades of that hideous year, after she left him before —the year Mabel died—fell dark across his besotted mind, and paralyzed it with terror. A gray prison-cell; arid, walled-in. He had broken out of it at last when he had induced her to return to him and beaten a hard way into a garden. A secret, illicit garden perhaps;

grown with poppies and nightshade and bitter, poisonous flowers; but sweet, necessary—direfully necessary—to him. If before, when he had been banished from it, he had suffered, what would be his suffering now!

"You can't—mean that, Jean," he managed to blurt out. "You—you wouldn't do that!"

"I do mean it. I mean every word of it!"

"No," he shook his head, "no—no,"—stupidly, doggedly. He got up again and tottered over to the window.

"What else can I do?" she went on, not quite so angrily now. There was something so abjectly pathetic about him. "I don't want to go on for another five years and, at the end of that time, be no farther on than we are now. It's a waste of time, a waste of effort. Perhaps if you didn't have me to depend upon, you'd pull up, you'd stop. There's no reason for you to drink. It isn't as though you'd always had a taste for it! Why do you do it? Why on earth do you do it?"

Her words beat round him with the fury of a hurricane, blinding him, driving him swiftly forward, swirling him round and buffeting him this way and that.

He mustn't let her go! The vast loneliness of all that her going signified was something his mind couldn't embrace. Through it swept bitterness, resentment, anger.

Why did he do it! Why on earth did he do it!

Some time—some other time—he would laugh when he thought of it. Laugh and laugh and laugh. She asking him *that!* If she only knew!

Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha! "Why do I do it!" Christ, if

he only dared! "I'll tell you why. I'll tell you. Listen if you want to hear! I do it because of you—because of you, do you hear! Because I've always wanted you, wanted your body, wanted it more than anybody has ever wanted anything. That's why—that's why I drink —so that I can see it better, so that it comes close and clear before my eyes, so that I can reach out my hands and touch it and love it and draw it to my mouth so my mouth can touch it! So that I can love you—like that lout of a husband used to love you—and that Marsh man loves you now—like that, d'you hear—ha, ha, ha! You never knew it, did you! Lots of times, lots of times . . . Dirty. Dirty old man. Lascivious old drunkard. Dirty for your sake. Lascivious—drunk for your sake, Jean. Drunk on you. Whiskey only makes it come close!"

Then a crazy courage surged into his beaten, drunken brain; a courage born of despair and shame. He was sick of it. Sick of it all. The pain, the yearning, the sweetness, the hotness, the nerve-tearing eroticism, the drunkenness—everything. If she had had enough—God Almighty knew that he had had enough too!

"I'll tell you why!" He wheeled on her suddenly. "I'll tell you!"

"Why?" she asked.

Slowly, very slowly, he moved back to the desk, clinging tenaciously to his crazy courage and at the same time fighting a fear that clutched at him to pull him down from his extraordinary exaltation.

How she would hate him! She'd look at him in hor-

ror and then shrink away from him as from some dreadful leprous thing!

Well, he could stand even that. She'd fly from him, rush out of the place, and he'd never see her again. But that would end it, end it forever and ever. He'd be free of her, liberated from that intolerable yoke of prurience and shame!

He reached the desk, his wild glittering eyes upon her.

Then between them on the desk there rose up a geranium plant with rough upstanding leaves and a coral-colored blossom. Youth and white skin and a fresh mouth and two coral-hearted breasts . . . a slim form naked against the lichen-covered trunks of trees . . . beauty, coolness, rapture. Sweet, clean, godly. Nothing lecherous or foul any more. Nothing really lascivious or shameful ever.

"Well," she demanded sharply, "why?"

From sheer weakness he dropped into his chair, his eyes loving her, his soul alight with a transcendental adoration.

"I—don't know," the words came out of him mechanically, "I really don't know, Jean, why I drink—so much." He tried to smile to give credibility to what he was saying. He did manage to pull the string, but it made him cry. He struggled against it for a second, and then gave in. No use struggling against such a flood of tears.

Jean's blood ran cold. She had the feeling of having committed an awful deed—having mercilessly thrashed

a little child, having wantonly hurt a small defenseless animal.

She went out of the office. She saw Elinor still at her desk, and spoke to her sharply:

"Why haven't you gone home?"

"Why—Jean!" Elinor's eyes were wide with surprise. "I—I thought I'd stay down and finish up this typing."

"Oh, all right. Good night."

"Good night," Elinor returned. Dumbfounded, she stared at the closed door.

IV

Jean had no inclination whatsoever to go to the office the next day. It was an inimical place; no longer a refuge. Alan and Merrie and Elinor had grown suddenly alien to her. They were gray and dismal and worn and pathetic; and they evoked boredom in her and no pity. She wasn't sorry even for Merrie. The memory of her cruelty of the night before made her a little sick. It gave her the physically revolting sensation of having witlessly beaten a stricken thing. The irrational impulse to inflict pain because you yourself were in pain. Ugh! Base, mean, contemptible!

She put off getting dressed. Paced the little apartment. Sat down and told herself that she was behaving like a fool, like a petulant school-girl, like a temperamental prima-donna. All right! She'd had her fun! She'd taken the man she wanted—hurt some one else in order to take him. Now she was getting a dose of the same medicine. Let her be a sport about it then instead

of whining, crying, taking it out on every one around her!

But that didn't help. The next minute she was in agony again, roaming the short confines of her cage, writing and re-writing that letter to Justin. A brief line or two, curtly demanding to know what he intended to do. An honest pleading heart-frank document penned in tears and in anguish.

"You can't have loved me with such a love as you had for me, and now not love me still. Love isn't so flimsy, Justin dear. Not our kind."

It was a misunderstanding upon his part. Something she'd said or done to wound him! Let him tell her then, and give her the chance to make amends. No matter what the fault, she would wipe it out if it cost her her life!

"Believe me, Justin, I'd rather not live at all than drag out life in this pain."

She actually sat down at her desk and picked up a pen.

But that drove her out.

No one was in the office except Miss Juniper, a new girl that they had recently taken on. Jean was rather relieved. She would have to apologize to both Elinor and Merrie, and she was in no mood for framing conciliatory phrases.

She opened her mail and considered calling up several people who had left messages for her to get in touch with them. She did phone one of them and then, dawdling, she fell to thinking of Justin again.

Was there some one else who was occupying his

thoughts now? Some one who, as she had once, had tumbled out of nowhere into his life? No. He would have told her if that had happened. That had been the one promise they had made one another. Not to love forever and aye, not to be faithful so long as they both should live. But to come out honestly and say that some one else had usurped the other's place. It wasn't some one. Merely that the flower had blossomed and the petals were falling now. The poor fading thing, once so beauteous and proudly stemmed, was dying on its still strong stalk. Poor Justin! Too sad, loving her yet too much, to tell her so.

"I know, dear—I know," she called to him in spirit across the miles. "It doesn't hurt one whit the less, dear Justin. But I understand."

She dabbed the tears from her eyes as the door opened and Elinor and Merrie came in—Elinor first and then Merrie, who closed the door behind him.

"You'll be surprised, Jean," Elinor said. "Merrie and I—are married."

"Merrie and you!" She could only look from one to the other.

"Yes," Merrie said, jerking the string, his eyes trying to be bright, "Elinor's done me the honor to become Mrs. Keats. We'd have let you know, Jean, but it was all so—well, sudden."

Jean remembered last night. No doubt they did too.

Elinor took off her things. Merrie went into his own office and came back again. They were quietly, controlledly excited; and they felt they ought to explain. Jean didn't even know that often during the past two

years Elinor had gone all the way to Mount Vernon to see that Merrie got home all right. Often she had stayed overnight and come in with him in the morning. Judy and the others had grown quite fond of her.

All that Jean would have to hear now so that she would understand that last night's decision wasn't the mad impulse of a moment.

Merrie did the telling. Elinor sat by his side looking down at the platinum circle on her finger. It was bewildering to think that she was actually married. Mrs. Keats! Yesterday at this time she had been Elinor Stronach. She had to remember about last night, what he had said to her, in order to realize that it was true.

"I've so little to offer—so pitifully little. Less—so much, much less than you think. It's all on the wrong side of the ledger—debits, debits, debits. Not even youth to match your youth. But I need you, Nellie—"

"Oh, don't call me—Nellie!"

"No? All right. Elinor then. You've really no idea, Elinor, how dreadfully I need you—for my wife."

He hadn't come to the end yet when Alan burst in.

They told him too of course but he took it as though it were quite a commonplace thing. He held a newspaper in his hand and fidgeted with it while Merrie took up his story again. Excessively nervous today, he got up and sat down, crossed to the window and back again.

Merrie glanced at him sharply more than once.

Then he finished and went into his own office. Elinor followed him.

Alan closed the door after her.

"God," he exclaimed, "I thought they'd never get out!"

"What's the matter?" She hadn't realized that he was upset about something. "What is it, Alan?"

"Maybe you know already," he said—and handed her the newspaper:

"LONE FLYER ATTEMPTS ATLANTIC HOP"

"Justin Marsh, well-known sportsman, took off from Tillow Field an hour before dawn this morning in a plane designed and constructed under his own superintendence—" etc., etc.

"Thanks, Alan," she said.

"Did you know about it, Jean?"

"Y-yes."

"Oh!"

She put on her things and went out, taking the newspaper with her. Down in the elevator and out onto the street, walking a little way. She didn't know where to go, and so she went home.

It was a quarter past twelve.

She took off her things and sat down on the couch.

Seven—eight hours since dawn. Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight hours before she would know anything.

He was hundreds of miles out to sea already. A quarter of the way across—a quarter of the way over, if—if—

The hands of the clock were converging at twelve. She couldn't hear the clock ticking, but she seemed to hear it—tick-tick-tick-tick—tick-tick-tick-tick— She felt

she must get up and take it into the other room. Or smash it.

She did neither.

V

The leaves had fallen. They danced like crisps across the roadways and lay in serried lanes along the gulleys and in wreaths about the lamp-posts and trees.

Tonight they couldn't dance for the rain that beat them sodden. Hard, insistent rain that would keep up all night and perhaps all day tomorrow. It emphasized the shelter of the house and the comfort and brightness of the crackling logs.

For more than an hour, since Sylvia had gone up to bed, Jean and Dudley had sat there, watching the embers drop into the bed of ash, scarcely exchanging a word.

Dudley was conscious of the time and the rain and his car outside. It was late, and it was a long way back to town. But the fire held him; the warmth, the tranquillity.

He had been out West all summer, establishing a branch office in Phoenix for his firm. They had offered him the management of it, and the opportunity to open other branch offices in the fast-growing Arizona towns; but he had decided against it and come back. New York spoiled you for smaller places. New York had a tang, a roar, a something that got in your blood and that bound you to her with all her hardships. Heat and cold and high rents and traffic jams. All its skyscrapers were yours somehow; all its shops and its scurrying and noise.

He thought of Peggy Glenn for a little. The divorce

decree would be made final soon, and then he would marry her. They'd live in the city for a while, and then move out to the country. Nice if they could find an oldish place like this with big rooms and a long-used fireplace! Something about oldish places that made them easy to feel at home in. Or was it just this particular place? It had struck him the last time he had been out too. Last Sunday. But not as forcibly as tonight.

Was it the place, he wondered; or was it Jean?

He glanced across at her and then back to the fire. Where was she away in her dreaming? Off somewhere with Marsh, poor devil!

Poor devil!

Dead these many months, plunged to the bottom of the sea so that not even a grave marked his remains, he still had the power to waken Dudley to jealousy.

He fought it down, telling himself that you couldn't hate a man who no longer existed. Something terrible in hating a dead man. Pushed you into the world of the dead too. If there was such a world. Nor could you hate a man whom you admired. Took a hell of a lot of courage to hop off like that, knowing that the chances were a thousand to one against you. Through the night. Into hundreds of square miles of blackness and loneliness with the water and death below you.

But Marsh had guts.

He remembered the night he had come to his place. And the fight. God, how they'd fought! Over her. Jean. Sitting there now at the other end of the sofa. Marsh

dead. And they two together, in front of the fire. Doris upstairs. Going on six now.

That took him back to the night she was born. Further back to the year before. The little apartment, the first one they had had. That awful evening he had left her. And then come back. God, how sweet it had seemed to hold her again in his arms after that lonely week. He had cried; she cried too. Their tears wetting each other's face.

The chain with its bright golden links and its rusty links and its dark corroded links stretched out before him; and he followed it back, link by link, to its very inception. On a ferry-boat, wasn't it? Jude Taylor.

Then forward, the links losing their luster, and regaining the least vestige of it finally—in this:

Doris upstairs. They two together in front of the fire. Friends.

Friends!

There was something seemingly idiotic in that that disturbed him dreadfully. Once lovers. For years so intimate, sleeping in the same bed every night. Now so careful of the proprieties! As though she were a different girl from what she had been, and he a different man. As though what had been hadn't been! Because they (she, rather) had decided it should be so. Friends now, because they decided to be friends!

Something damned crazy and unnatural about it! And he had been duped into subscribing to it, accepting this friendship sop, when it wasn't what he wanted at all. God! A woman he had had for wife!

He glanced at her again. Moved close. He took her

hands and, suddenly, kissed her. Crushed her in his arms and kissed her mouth.

She fought against him, struggled fiercely to break free.

"You're mad!"

"Maybe I am. Maybe *you're* mad," he whispered hoarsely, hotly.

"Let me go—at once!"

He still held her; his arms strong, his desire stronger, but his spirit flagging. He'd have to make her understand first. And he didn't have the words. There weren't any words sharp or clear enough to make her understand.

"You're still mine," he said, knowing that that wasn't expressing it. "You'll always be mine, Jean. This friends-business is crazy. You were my wife. I can't explain what I mean but—but it's all wrong—this—this pretending. I don't give a damn for Peggy Glenn. I'm marrying her only because I'm not married to you any more. You're what I want. You, Jean, d'you hear? And here's where I want to be—with you."

He retained only her hands now, holding them tight in his as he pleaded with her.

"I love you, Jean. I've always loved you. You fell in love with Marsh. All right, maybe you did. Maybe you couldn't help it. But he's gone now. Couldn't you be happy again with me, Jean—happy enough to live with me? Won't you try, Jean? You've no one now. And we might make a go of it—together. I'll let you have your way. I won't be like I was—stubborn—and all that. I'm older now, Jean. . . . What I did anyway was only

because I loved you—and couldn't bear to give you up. You know that. Even with the kid—when I took it away. Christ, I'd have done anything to get you back!"

But he's gone now! You've no one now!

Those were the phrases that stabbed through her.

How right he was, how cruelly right!

Quick flashes and images pierced her mind as she listened to him. Justin smoking, one hand stroking her neck as she knelt in front of him: "Sometimes, Jean, I wish you'd had a child by me!"

How fervently she had prayed in those weeks after he had died to be pregnant with his child. Now it would be swelling her womb. His child, all of him that remained, would be in her hands to care for and love. His being, his ways.

Dudley was right: he was gone now. He must have had that fatal trip planned for weeks and months. Was that why he had said: "Sometimes, Jean, I wish you'd had a child by me." So that there would be something of him left behind? Or would a child have held him back from taking that awful hazard? Did he rebel at last against the freedom which he had always advocated and crave something that would bind him to a lair, to a tribe?

Their idea of life, then—the idea of living that they had shared—had failed him in the end, and he had preferred death to the continuance of a quest in which he no longer believed!

No, he could have come to her, in that case, and laid the dead idea at her feet and shown her how, having no virtue, it had died.

Perhaps.

But she would never know. As Dudley said, he was gone now! So what use were ideas, what use was she to herself any more? Go back to Dudley. Give him what little there was left of her to give. Surely she should go back if he had suffered for love of her one-tenth as much as she had suffered lately!

It wouldn't be hard either with this numbness in her heart to be wife to him. She'd feel at least that she was serving some one. And that conceivably might blow a little warmth back into her.

"You can't live your life according to an idea. One day it fails you and then where are you?"

Who had said that to her once? Propatkin? Tierbaum? Barry Crome?

No, Crome had said:

"I had ideals once. Ideals and an idea about living. . . . Now if you were to ask me what it was, damned if I could tell you. Got lost in the shuffle. . . ."

Had her idea—that belief she had always had in love—got lost in the shuffle too? Perhaps, like Barry Crome's, it was a bum idea! That's why it was so evanescent now. Only the least little bit of her believed it—believed that love would come again. It couldn't ever. One day she might mistake some mockery of it for the thing itself. But love? No. No more.

Go to Dudley then—for wife. Comfort him. Say: "I couldn't help hurting you, Dudley. I had to hurt you in order to be hurt myself. Now I will comfort you if I can and I will kiss you if that will help even though my lips are dead."

But no words came.

She went on listening to him. And to all he said, she shook her head.

Then he stopped, and looked into the fire again. Got up and walked up and down.

The rain still beat against the windows. It recalled a day long ago when they had met a tramp—Scottie his name was—and afterwards, in the evening, they had lain in each other's arms and listened to the rain outside. And once, years later, when he had reminded her that he could have taken her then, she had blazed back at him in anger:

"Because I believed in love. I believed in it even then. Now I believe in it a thousand times more."

Yes. And now—?

Did she believe it would come again? One day, one day if she kept hold of that idea, if she didn't let it get lost in the shuffle, would she find it again—bright, new, sweet?

Dudley went into the hall and put on his coat. He came back into the room and stood looking down at her.

"I'm sorry as hell, Jean," he said, "that I broke out like that. I don't know what was in me. Forgive me, will you? It won't happen again."

She went with him to the door.

"I'm only sorry, Dudley, that I couldn't."

"That's all right, Jean. Let's forget it."

She watched him go down the steps into the rain.

Then, closing the door, she went back to the fire.

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